I
I Met You-After
世界の終わりに君に出会った
the End of the World
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I Met You After the End of the World

世界の終わりに君に出会った

–

“None of them would ever get a proper burial. They’d rot in their homes, unknown and uncared for, as alone in death as they were in life.”

–

“We are the only ones
seeing
the cherry blossoms
this year.
Everyone else is dead.”

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Afterword

I Fell in Love With A Soapland Girl! Volume 1 Preview

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[Spring]

Chapter 1

What is the best thing about the end of the world?

I don’t have to go to work anymore.

There is no boss who can fire me because he is dead.

There are no colleagues to impress because they are all dead.

There are no clients sending demanding emails because — well, you get the point.

Tokyo.

It used to be the biggest city on the planet. It was the city every person in Japan aspired to come to. It was the place where the best minds of the country competed to reach the top.

Now it has a population of one.

Me.

Yamada Daisuke.

I am now the Prime Minister of Japan. I am the mayor of Tokyo. I am judge, jury and executioner. I voted myself into office because there is no opposition party. I'm the best mind in the country because I'm the only one left.

Although, as the last man standing, things do get quite lonely. There is no one to talk to, no one to share a meal with. Well, it’s not like people had the time to get together often when Tokyo was still full of people. People lived alone in their little apartments, keeping to themselves and spending their free time on the Internet. In that sense, I am now just as alone as I was before.

There are no crowds and no annoying sales people knocking on my door. Those delinquent punks smoking outside the convenience store are now dead. The cute girl who worked there is also gone.

I stepped out of my apartment, and the sight of a dead city greeted me. An endless sea of houses, stretching as far as the eye could see, and not a single sound besides the wind, since there was no one left to make a sound. It was eerily quiet.

I took a deep breath. Winter had passed and the air was warmer now. I spread my arms and stretched. It had been a while since I stepped out.

“Hello!”

…

Of course no one answered. My neighbors had all died last winter. Well, it’s not like I was expecting an answer.

I have this whole city to myself.

Now what?

In the year 20XX, a mysterious virus ended Japan. It first started with what looked like the common cold. People would get a light fever and a headache, think it's nothing serious, and then go to work like usual. The virus would then spread through the office, and the infection rates rose at a rapid rate.

The first reports of a sudden rise in the number of people with a fever appeared in newspapers in January. By March, every person knew someone who had succumbed to this mysterious illness. The death rates weren’t very high, so no one was really too worried.

Besides, work was important. "Go to work to support Japan!” our Prime Minister said. *The economy must be kept alive,* the ruling party said in a newspaper editorial.

By the end of April of that year, scientists had mapped the genome and began working on a vaccine. As a precaution, official guidelines recommended for everyone to stay at home “*as much as possible*.”

But we kept going to the office anyway because those old farts from the bubble era thought sending emails from home was disrespectful. Everything had to be printed, signed, stamped three times, and hand-delivered with a bow.

The government didn't stop us from going to work even when other countries declared a state of emergency. It felt like all the politicians were saying the same thing.

The virus is Korea's problem.

Japan is Japan. We do it our way.

It can't be helped. Oh well…

When May arrived and the weather grew warmer, the virus mutated and spread even faster than before. Soon it was discovered that our immune systems couldn't deal with this mutated virus. The fever increased until the body's organs began to shut down, and by then, it was too late.

Trial vaccines from a Japan-Germany joint venture went into production around that time, but by then the virus had begun mutating at a rapid pace, faster than the scientists could keep up with.

To make matters worse, a new deadlier mutation from America landed in Japan via a flight from Hawaii. Rumor has it that it was on one of those new A380s, those planes that look like turtles. Apparently, a guy from Saitama went to visit relatives in Honolulu and then came back with the American mutation of the virus.

Since the death rate was much higher now, not even the bubble era bastards could force their employees to come to work. The Japanese government finally declared a state of emergency in June, but it was too late. The virus had already spread into every corner of Japanese society on the back of packed trains and buses.

In June, the government *strongly advised* people to stay at home and refused to take any action beyond that. Incompetent leadership. Perhaps one of the hallmark signs of post-bubble era politicians.

Most people listened, and some did not. During those sweltering summer months, there was mayhem in the city when people tried to flee. The highways were jammed, and there were rumors of the Prime Minister asking the US military to help enforce order.

The weeks and months passed by, and society crumbled piece by piece. First the government rationed food, electricity, and water because supply chains broke down. Then the trains stopped running because there weren't enough healthy conductors to operate the lines. Offices closed, stores shuttered. During autumn, Tokyo became a ghost town, with everyone waiting for the end in their tiny apartments.

Tokyo's ocean of tiny apartments turned into graveyards.

There were no zombies or nuclear missiles. The end of the world was surprisingly quiet and peaceful. Humanity ended in a whimper rather than a bang.

And those who didn't listen to Prime Minister Sato and fled Tokyo?

Well... I'm not sure what happened to them because I was holed up in my apartment.

"I'm out of smokes again..."

I sighed through my nose. It was annoying to run out in the middle of the day because it meant that I had to make another trip to the convenience store.

Finding a convenience store that hadn't been looted was surprisingly easy. I heard that looting became a big problem in America and China, but looting was just something that almost never happened in Japan, even when the police force collapsed and there was no one to enforce the laws.

"Let's go get my favorite Lucky Stars."

I put my crowbar and sledgehammer into a backpack and got onto my Honda Super Cub.

The hum of the engine roared through the absolute silence of the residential neighborhood. The air felt relaxed and peaceful, like a quiet Sunday morning when no one had to work — except Monday would never come and the silence would stay forever.

"Ah..."

A gentle gust swept past and rustled the blooming cherry blossoms in the local park.

"It's spring already."

I spent most of the winter holed up inside my 1LDK while my neighbors died one by one. I didn't think that I would actually last until spring since I was a mere salaryman without any other useful life skills.

I worked at Sonia Electronics, a Japanese electronics company that saw its glory years before Apple and Samsung took over. To summarize my work, it involved a lot of documents, meetings and reports. But no matter how hard we worked, Apple and Samsung were always ahead of us.

Japan can’t keep up anymore.

That was a common sentiment among us.

In fact, I still went to the office when most others called in sick. Until the end, I was an obedient salaryman who spent all of his time at the office. Only when no one else was working anymore did I stop.

Why did I survive? I should've caught the virus just like everyone else.

Did I have some kind of immunity? Did my blood carry the cure? Or maybe I was just incredibly lucky. We'll never know because all the scientists are dead and all the pachinko places are closed.

It would be pretty boring to keep breaking into convenience stores in my neighborhood, so this time I drove into the city to hunt for supplies.

I arrived in Shinjuku and searched for a good target. Soon, I found a convenience store near the station exit that was left untouched by the gangs that robbed convenience stores during the mayhem when people tried to flee the city.

I got out my sledgehammer and smashed apart the lock at the bottom, then used the crowbar to force the shutter open. All in all, it took a total of ten minutes.

The first time I did this kind of thing during the winter it took me almost an hour. I didn't have any tools, so I had to steal from a hardware store that had already been broken into. After that, getting into shuttered convenience stores was quite easy. Convenience stores had little security due to Japan's crime rate, which was the same as its birth rate — very low, almost non-existent.

After I got past the first barrier, I smashed apart the glass window and forced my way in.

Once inside the convenience store, I ignored the bentos. Those things had spoiled half a year ago.

It was around the summer when supply chains broke down and no more fresh food came into stores. Well, I was fortunate enough to have found my own source of fresh food. So far, nutrition hasn’t been a big problem.

Sweet! The storage room was left unlocked by an employee.

I stuffed my bag with cigarettes and cup noodles. There were also several boxes of bottled drinks, but I ignored those for now. Liquids are too heavy. I'll mark down the location of this store and get the rest later. It's not like there was anyone else who might take it.

But I felt thirsty, so I took one bottle with me.

As I climbed out of the broken window, I glanced at the cash register. I wonder how much money was in there?

…

It didn't matter anyway.

With my supplies in my bag, I got onto my trusty Super Cub and started the engine.

…

Hmm…

Going back like this would be a little boring since there was nothing to do at home. You know what? The weather is nice. Let's just cruise around the city.

The streets were surprisingly clean and empty. Here and there, I saw an abandoned car or a tree that had fallen over during the last typhoon.

The roar of my Super Cub echoed off the buildings around me. The whistle of the wind blew past me. There were no other sounds. It was as if the world had ended — and it had.

Crash!

Huh?

I stopped my bike.

What was that?

Crash!

The sound came from a nearby convenience store, located on the ground floor of an office building. I remembered going inside that one during the winter. It had already been looted before I arrived, and I only went in there because I was too lazy to break into another place. Unfortunately, this location had been picked clean by gangs.

The unnatural crashing sounds continued to come out of the store. It was as if a wild animal was rampaging inside.

I gulped.

Wild animals have been slowly expanding their territory ever since human beings disappeared.

The logical thing would be to ignore it and go home. If I was injured by a wild boar, there would be no doctor to take care of me.

But...

What if...?

...

I got off my bike but left the engine running. I approached the convenience store with my crowbar in hand.

The crashing sounds stopped. Whatever was inside the store had noticed the sound of the Super Cub engine.

I entered the store.

Huh?

What was in front of me wasn't a wild boar; instead I saw a girl in a seifuku school uniform crouching in front of an empty shelf. Long black hair reached her lower back.

She looked at me, and I looked at her. We made eye contact. It was the first time I made eye contact with another human being in over half a year.

My first thought was that she was cute. Her almond eyes were large, and her features well arranged. She was the type who would attract the

attention of the boys in her class and be the target of confessions, and, on Valentine’s Day, her chocolates would be the number one prize.

I opened my mouth to speak. At first no words came out. I hadn't spoken to anyone since last summer. For a moment I forgot how to approach a stranger, especially because I didn't make it a habit of approaching strangers in the first place.

“Uhm… This store has been looted clean a long time ago."

She said nothing and looked up at me with her clear black eyes.

“Hey…you…” Did she come from outside of Tokyo? Was she a survivor like me? I reached out to her.

In a flash, she pulled a gun out of her school bag and pointed it at me.

I froze.

I knew nothing about guns, but in times like these, it was likely that it was real.

Honestly, I was glad to see another face after all this time, but she clearly didn’t feel the same way.

I glanced at her legs. Her skirt was riding up and revealing a pair of white thighs.

She was a cute JK. The end of the world was more dangerous for her than it was for me.

Her finger curled around the trigger. Crap, she was going to shoot! Even if I ran now, she could easily hit me in the back.

I put down my crowbar.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

She said nothing.

I put down my bag and emptied the contents: cup ramen, cigarettes, and a bottle of water.

"Here, you can have this."

I gently pushed the supplies towards her, like a prey giving the predator an offering in exchange for its life.

“I’m going to leave now,” I said and slowly backed off without turning around. She kept the gun pointed at me the entire time. Her finger was still on the trigger.

I climbed through the broken glass and continued to walk slowly, then I sidestepped out of her line of fire.

Phew...

It was only then that I realized that sweat was dripping down from my forehead. My heart was pounding so hard that I could hear it.

I was still afraid to turn my back towards the convenience store. What if she came out to shoot me?

"Wait!"

A girl's voice sounded. It could only be hers.

She emerged from the convenience store with her gun in one hand and a piece of paper in the other.

She offered me the piece of paper.

"Here."

Huh?

It was a crisp five thousand yen note.

"Why are you giving me this?" I asked.

“Payment for the food and water."

I looked at the money and then at her.

"And what am I supposed to do with that money?"

She blinked. It looked like she didn't understand. I decided to say it more clearly.

"Money is useless now. It's worthless if there is nothing to buy. Money is only useful if there are lots of other people and businesses that sell things. It’s a way of keeping trade and commerce orderly in a country. And right now, there are no other people and there is no country.” I pointed at the convenience store. “Food is more valuable than the paper the money is printed on.”

Her mouth was half-open. Her lips formed an O shape.

"Mh...I see."

It was around the time when supply chains stopped and rationing started that I realized that money wasn’t worth anything anymore. Without a single announcement, money became worthless and ration tickets became valuable. It was like we had returned to post-war Japan.

But soon after that, ration tickets also became worthless when there were no government workers to distribute supplies — because they too succumbed to the virus.

Honestly, I felt a strange sense of relief when money became worthless.

Work hard in high school to get into a good university.

Get into a good university to get a good job.

Get a good job to earn money.

Earn money to buy stuff.

Getting out of bed was a struggle; going to work was like climbing a mountain; work was painless torture. It wasn't until it all ended that I realized how much weight it placed on my shoulders.

"Keep your money and keep the food."

"But you should pay for things that someone has given you."

For a girl who was pointing a gun at me just a moment ago, she was surprisingly earnest.

"You're from outside of Tokyo?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah, how did you know?"

"You don't look like the type of girl who's from the city."

She furrowed her eyebrows.

Oops, did I say something rude? Maybe she thought I was calling her an unsophisticated country bumpkin. I just meant to say that she was earnest in a way kids from the city weren’t. I hadn't talked to anyone in half a year. My conversation skills might be a little rusty. I should apologize.

"I'm sorry, it's not what you think. I just mean you don't look like a Tokyo native."

"..."

"Did you come to Tokyo all by yourself?"

She hesitated and then nodded, which was a dangerous admission. She acknowledged that she, a cute JK in her prime, was on her own without anyone accompanying her.

In times like these when laws didn't exist anymore...

But then again, she was the one holding a gun. There were three steps between us, so there was plenty of time for her to shoot me if I made a wrong move.

Fortunately for her, I wasn't the sort of human trash who would assault a cute JK.

"Well, in that case..."

I turned around and headed towards my Super Cub.

Hmm?

There was the sound of footsteps. I glanced over my shoulder and saw her behind me, her eyes on the ground. Why was she following me?

I got on my bike, and she got on the backseat and held onto my jacket. It was then that I noticed how small her hands were.

This girl...

She was following me. What am I going to do with her? Or rather, what did she want from me?

Well, whatever. I could figure that out later.

I couldn't imagine how she made it to Tokyo on her own. And why would she even come to Tokyo when it was a dead city?

“Here, take my helmet,” I said and put it on her head. It was a little bit too big for her.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I’ll be fine.”

“...”

She peered at me, but said nothing.

Neither of us said anything on the way back. I never asked her if she wanted to come with me, and she never asked for anything either. I suppose sticking together was the natural thing to do when everyone else was dead.

The opposite happens when you live in the city. You never talk to anyone *because* you are surrounded by a lot of people.

But in the end, being truly alone is scary.

[Spring]

Chapter 2

I was in my third year of working for a company when the virus first appeared on the news in January. I was one of the many suits you would see squeezing onto trains in the morning and trickling out of office buildings in the evening.

The first five years of working for a company consisted of lots of overtime, low pay, and almost no annual leave. After five years, you'd be considered worthy of a promotion and suddenly your salary would rise.

It didn't matter how hard you worked. Significant promotions before the five-year mark were unheard of. And if you screwed up at any point during those five years, you'd be demoted to a department no one cared about.

If you somehow got fired, then you'd be condemned to a lifetime of part-time jobs because no one wants to hire a person who was fired by a company.

Such was the path of the salaryman.

I graduated from university, and during my first year of full-time employment, I worked earnestly.

"Let's do our best today too," is what I used to say to myself in the mirror after I had shaved in the morning, but this habit soon stopped.

Life was an endless repeat of going to work, coming home on the last train, and then collapsing on my bed. My happiest years were those I spent as a student, and I even began to wonder if that had all just been a dream since the memories of my youth became fuzzier every time I tried to recall them.

This clockwork life ground my earnest feelings to dust. Before I knew it, I'd wake up and go to sleep with a heavy sigh.

And so, when news of the virus appeared on the news and the stock market crashed, I felt nothing at all.

I took the JK to my apartment. I never thought that I'd be bringing a JK home one day. A real life JK with long black hair. In her uniform.

Just thinking that made me feel like I could get arrested, but all the police officers are dead.

"Pardon the intrusion," she said as she took off her shoes.

"Make yourself at home. I'll make tea."

"Thanks."

I went to the kitchen and turned on the kettle. Luckily, the electricity was still working despite no one maintaining the power stations. Some kind of backup generator must be working somewhere.

Hooray for Japan's world-class infrastructure!

"Are you okay with green tea? I also have coffee."

No answer came.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

Did she run away? But I didn't hear the sound of the door opening.

I went to the living room and —

"ZzzZzz..."

She was lying on my bed, her eyes closed, knees drawn to her chest, her chest rising and falling gently.

"Uhm...are you asleep?"

She must've been more tired than she appeared. She didn't have a bike or car with her, so she might've walked to Tokyo.

I kneeled next to the bed and looked at her sleeping face. She looked like a normal girl like this, as if the world still existed and nothing had wiped out the human race.

"Hnghh," she shifted in her sleep and her skirt rode up her legs, exposing her white thighs. I could almost see her panties.

Did no one teach this girl to never leave herself exposed like this in a man's apartment? She appeared so vulnerable. A lot of guys wouldn't be able to hold back. They'd think that she was tempting them.

I sighed through my nose.

What a troublesome JK.

I put a blanket over her and enjoyed some green tea by myself while listening to her soft breathing.

By the time she woke up, it was already late afternoon. The sun was setting, covering the empty city in a nostalgic orange color.

"Hngh?" She woke up and rubbed her eyes.

"You're finally awake."

"Oh, I fell asleep."

"You must've been really tired."

"I guess so. I feel much better now."

"You can go take a shower if you want. I have clean towels prepared. The electricity is still working, so you can use the washing machine."

"T-Thanks."

She didn't move. Instead, she looked at me.

"What?" I asked.

"You keep calling me '*you*' and that bothers me. We should at least introduce ourselves."

"I would've asked for your name, but you pointed a gun at me."

"...sorry, I guess."

What an insincere apology, but I decided not to point that out. She was a cute JK; she had every reason to be suspicious of an adult man like me.

"I'm Yamada Daisuke. Twenty-six years-old. I'm a third year employee at Sonia Electronics. It's nice to meet you."

The troublesome JK moved and sat on my bed in the seiza position.

"I am Fujiwara Sayaka. I’m a third year, class 3-B. It's nice to meet you."

We bowed to each other.

"I'll just call you Yamada-san if that's okay."

"Sure. Erm..."

"Just call me Sayaka."

"Eh? Are you sure?"

"Mh-hmm, everyone calls me that."

"Okay...Sayaka."

She didn't hesitate at all, nor did she seem embarrassed. JKs these days sure are something else.

“So you came from outside Tokyo, correct?"

"That's right."

I swallowed. There was something I wanted to ask, and at the same time I was afraid to find out.

"Can you tell me...what happened outside of the city? Are there more survivors?"

"That's..."

She began to answer, but then hesitated. After a moment, a growl from her stomach interrupted the silence. Her face flushed red.

I snorted and suppressed a laugh.

"S-Shut up!"

"I didn't even laugh."

"You were clearly going to."

"Whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty?"

“In Japan, it’s guilty until proven innocent, and I deem you guilty."

"Okay, okay...wait a moment, I'll get you something to eat."

I got up and went to the kitchen. A little while later, I came back with cup ramen, a freshly made egg roll, a bar of dark chocolate, and a cup of tea.

Her eyes grew wide. She grabbed the chopsticks, said, ‘*Itadakimasu*,' and dug in. Within minutes she ate everything I served her.

"Would you like seconds?"

"Yes, please."

She ate two more cup ramen before she let out a satisfied sigh and declared that she couldn't eat another bite.

"So, what happened outside of Tokyo?" I asked.

"Hee, so it's information in exchange for food?"

"I would've given you the food anyway. I'm not the type of guy who would leave someone starving when I've got enough food."

"Yeah, I know."

"Huh?"

“It’s a long story and it's unpleasant. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"Yeah."

Sayaka took a breath and began to tell me about what happened outside of the city.

After Prime Minister Sato told everyone to stay at home, a lot of people listened, but a lot of people also fled the city. Those people poured into the countryside, looking for food and shelter. At first, the locals tried their best to help, but when the infection rates in the Kanto region increased exponentially, it was blamed on the fleeing Tokyoites. By then, rumors of the new imported variant from Hawaii had spread across the Internet, and people refused to help anyone from Tokyo. This eventually developed into discrimination against anyone who spoke with a Tokyo accent, and in Chubu and Tohoku, anyone who spoke with a general Kanto accent was turned away.

After the police and JSDF broke down, social order also vanished. Men from Tokyo were killed by countryside vigilantes, and women were captured by criminal gangs.

"Although everyone in the countryside also died in the end," she said.

This story made me feel sick to my stomach. The government shut down most online message boards to contain rumors, so I had no idea that this kind of thing was happening.

"So the reason why you are in Tokyo..."

"I came here from Niigata, but my parents are both Tokyo natives, so I speak with a Tokyo accent. I couldn't stay there anymore, so I decided to come to Tokyo."

"Where are your parents?"

She shrugged.

"They went to Italy for a vacation but ended up stranded in Milan when Italy declared a state of emergency. They sent me a message telling me that they are fine, but LINE was completely overloaded, and I wasn't able to reply."

"I see."

I looked at her. This girl was on her own the entire time and came to Tokyo while avoiding gangs and vigilante groups.

I glanced at the gun beside her. She seemed to be quite used to holding it. Did she have to use it before?

"Is something wrong?" Sayaka asked.

“It's nothing. Anyway, for now, let's go get some food."

"I left the things you gave me in that convenience store," she said in an apologetic tone.

"Never mind that. No one will take that stuff anyway."

Because there is no one else left.

But I didn't say those words. There was a good mood in the air between us, and I didn't want to ruin it.

"Then where are we going to get food? Actually, wait a minute…how do you still have fresh eggs for egg rolls? All the stores are empty.”

"I'll show you."

[Spring]

Chapter 3

We left the apartment and went downstairs. I walked past my Super Cub.

"Aren't we taking your bike?" Sayaka asked.

"The place is within walking distance."

She said nothing and followed me.

We walked down the empty streets. Our footsteps sounded loud and clear. There were no people, no cars, and no rumbling sounds of a Super Cub engine. But this time, there was a person walking next to me.

She had her hands behind her back, glancing left and right. Her eyes looked curious.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Mm, it's just that I've never lived in Tokyo before, so this is my first time seeing this kind of residential neighborhood."

"Is it different from Niigata?"

"It's more or less the same, but the houses are more tightly packed together."

"It's Tokyo after all. The land here is worth more than gold, or at least it used to be."

"Right. Money is worthless now." She sounded a little dejected.

"Actually gold isn't worth much anymore either. What are you going to do with a bar of gold now? It's only worth something if someone else wants to buy it. And there is no one to buy it now."

"Hmm...I don't really get it."

If I recall my own high school days correctly, you don't get taught economic theory or stuff like intrinsic and perceived value. Those things would have to wait until university.

"It doesn't matter. I'll explain it to you later."

We walked past several houses and then I came to a stop.

"What's wrong? Are we here?"

"No..."

"Then why are you stopping?"

My eyes fell on a particular house. It was a house I haven't thought about in a long time, but speaking to Sayaka reminded me of it.

"This place..."

This is where my ex-girlfriend lived. I was in my second year of high school at that time, and we were in the same class. On the first day of the new semester, she was assigned the seat next to me, and we hit it off.

She was a beautiful girl who was well liked by almost everyone. Long black hair, a cute face, a small frame that made you want to protect her — and she had a large chest for a JK.

We got along well and soon started hanging out after school. A little while after that we began to date. One day she invited me to her house and

told me that her parents weren't going to come home that night. We played games in her room and ended up kissing almost naturally. I remember clearly how she was the one who first began to use tongue, and I responded in kind. She smelled really good, and her body felt unbelievably soft when I touched her. Even now I could still vividly remember that time.

A week after that we began to sleep together. She'd invite me over to her place whenever her parents weren't home, and we'd do it until I had to go home. She was really curious and wanted to try out all sorts of things she saw on the Internet. She'd get me going again for a second and third round.

That probably was the greatest part of my youth. At least I knew that a lot of my friends were jealous of me. I even heard that some guys used my girlfriend as fap material and that gave me a little ego boost.

After graduation, we went to different universities. At first, we'd email each other and meet up on weekends, but at some point we both realized that we weren't in high school anymore.

One rescheduled meet up turned into, "I'm a little busy this week. Let's meet up some other time," and then gradually, the frequency of the emails slowed down until we stopped messaging each other all together.

I still thought about her from time to time when I slept with different girls at university, but she disappeared from my thoughts completely when I entered the workforce. It was as if our time together had come and gone, and adult life has no room for memories of youth.

What was she doing now? Did she get married and have children? Did she still live here?

At least I could answer that last question. She didn't live here (or anywhere) because she was probably dead.

"Yamada-san." Sayaka shook my arm and I came back to reality. "What's wrong?"

"Ah, it's nothing. This was my childhood friend's house," I lied as naturally as I breathed to avoid an awkward conversation. It was a skill all working adults possessed. I didn't want to talk to a JK I just met about the girl I slept with when I was her age.

"...I see. And is she dead?"

"Yeah, probably — wait a minute, I never told you it was a girl."

"I just guessed."

"Huh."

"Don't '*huh*' me. It was a girl, right?"

"Yeah, it was a girl."

"I see." She smiled smugly.

We continued on and soon arrived at your destination: a mansion that looked like it belonged in an upper class neighborhood.

"There's food in there?" Sayaka asked.

"Yeah. Just follow me."

We entered through a broken window at the back of the building.

"I broke in here a few months ago. First I tried going through the front door, but the owner imported some kind of super secure door from abroad and the windows are bullet proof. I tried to smash my way in with a sledgehammer but couldn't get the windows wouldn't break. After a while I found a small regular window next to the staff entrance of the house that could be broken."

"It kind ruins the whole point of having all this security if the staff entrance is a weak point."

I shrugged. I didn't know how rich people thought about security.

We climbed through the back window, entered the house, and went down to the basement.

"This is it."

I showed her a large fridge and opened it.

"Beef, pork, chicken, mutton, vegetables — this rich guy has packaged and frozen everything. There's enough in here to last at least a couple of months."

"Ohhhh~" Sayaka's eyes sparkled. "There's even rice!"

"Take whatever you want. We're having sukiyaki tonight."

"You know how to cook, Yamada-san?"

"...no, as a salaryman I only know about the best takeout restaurants that are still open after the last train."

"Then..."

"I was hoping you'd know how to make sukiyaki."

"..."

"..."

"My parents travel a lot, so I had to learn how to take care of myself," she said and then added with a dubious look, "sukiyaki isn't that hard to make, you know."

"I thank you for your kindness."

"Fortunately, I'm in a good mood today. I will make the best sukiyaki ever. Aren't you a lucky guy? You get to eat a JK's home cooked food."

I bowed to her.

"Geez, stop it. It's embarrassing if you take it all so seriously."

We picked out the ingredients and then went home.

"Hahnnnn~ This is the best."

Sayaka was admiring her own work, and I had to admit that she was better at cooking than I thought.

The soup base was perfect, the vegetables were perfectly cut, even the rice sparkled like pearls. A delicious scent filled the room. Sayaka and I leaned towards the pot and took a deep breath.

I cracked open a beer. The fizzing sound was music to my ears.

"Let me have a sip too."

"No way, you're still underage."

"Laws don't exist anymore, so it's fine."

"I'm still an upstanding member of society. I cannot condone underage drinking."

"Society doesn't exist anymore, remember?"

"Well, I suppose..."

I got a glass and poured her a small amount of beer.

"You might not like it," I warned her.

"It's fine, just let me try it. That's too little! Give me at least half a glass."

I filled the glass, and she took a deep gulp. Almost immediately she spat it all out, mainly at my face.

After coughing violently, she said, "This is disgusting! How can you drink this stuff?"

"..."

She looked at me.

"Pfff, you're soaked, Yamada-san."

"..."

Sayaka laughed until there were tears in her eyes, but it was impossible to get angry at her. Instead, I found myself smiling slightly. Even though I was soaked in beer, this was the most fun I've had in years.

"Stop laughing, you super rude JK. I warned you that you wouldn't like beer."

"All the boys at school like to talk about how they are drinking on weekends and smoking in bathrooms. I thought it would taste pretty good, but I never got to try it because a girl like me can't buy alcohol at a convenience store." She pinched her own cheeks. "My baby face makes me look younger than I actually am."

"Your classmates were probably just trying to show off. Boys at that age are like that."

Her eyes landed on my pack of Lucky Stars.

"Hey, let me try one."

"No, absolutely not." I put the pack away.

"Ehhh? But you smoke, right?"

"That's only because I was a working adult. I need it to stay focused."

"Heee..."

She didn't seem fully convinced, but she didn't push the matter further.

I dried myself with a towel and then we dug in. It was the best meal ever.

After dinner I stood out on the balcony, smoking. I looked up at the night sky. Tonight, a full moon hung in the sky. It was clear and bright like it was the *Tsukimi* festival already.

I exhaled deeply. I caught myself smiling for no reason.

For the first time in a long time I felt a childish joy in my chest. How unsightly for an adult like me to feel this kind of giddiness. I was like an elementary school kid who felt excited about making his first friend.

Sayaka knocked on the glass sliding door.

"Yamada-san, I'm going to take a bath, okay?"

"There are clean towels in the drawer."

"Don't peek."

"I won't. You can lock me out on the balcony if you want."

"There's no need to go that far."

She went to take her bath.

I never thought I'd end up living together with a JK. Actually, neither of us agreed to live together like this. We met each other at the convenience store and she just followed me, probably because there was no one else left. We had no choice but to stick together. The alternative was just too lonely.

I wonder how long we would stay together like this?

[Spring]

Chapter 4

"Ten thousand....fifty thousand....eighty thousand..."

The next day, Sayaka emptied her school bag and put all of her money on the table. They were all crisp new notes.

In the end, she counted one-hundred and fifty-thousand yen.

"This is all of the money I earned working part-time, and now it is worthless," she said with a sigh.

"Oh, what kind of jobs did you work?"

One-hundred and fifty-thousand yen is a lot of money for a JK to have. What kind of work would she need to do to get this kind of money?

"I worked in a convenience store for a while and then a friend introduced me to a maid cafe. The pay was much higher there."

I imagined her in a maid costume.

Cute...

It would definitely suit her.

Incidentally, her uniform was in the washing machine, and she was wearing one of my pajamas right now. It was far too big for her, but somehow that made it look even better.

"I wanted to go on a trip and there were so many things I wanted to buy, but now all of this money is worthless..."

"You can get all of those things for free."

"But it's just not the same."

I understood what she meant. I remember the feeling of going to the store as a high school student and using my hard earned money to buy the latest game system. The satisfaction and excitement gained from that was different from getting the same thing for free. But of course, all of that changes once you become an adult.

"I understand that feeling, but it's different for adults."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"Once you are an adult and get a permanent job, the money starts to pile up. As long as you don’t get married and buy a house, then you will always have plenty of money, and you can buy anything you want at the mall. It becomes less about the money that you have and more about if you have the time and energy to enjoy it."

"Heee, you make it sound like you have piles of money lying around."

"Anyway, you should be glad that you have your earnings in cash. All of my money is in the bank and those are closed forever. The fruits of my hard work will forever be some numbers on a screen."

"Did you manage to save a lot?"

I raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry, that was rude of me, I was just curious. You don't need to answer that. I'm not some kind of gold digger, okay? I was just — "

"I get it," I said and suppressed a smile. "I don't mind telling you since it doesn't matter anyway. I've worked for three years before the pandemic hit...I think I have around 5 million yen in savings."

"Five million?!"

"For an adult, that's pretty normal, actually it’s not even that much," I said. "Salarymen don't earn much before their fifth year at a company. It is only after the first promotion that we begin to earn more." And then I added, "Your parents probably have even more."

From a JK's point of view, five million yen was probably an unbelievable amount of money. But as an adult, it wasn't much. In fact, it was barely anything. If I lost my job, five million yen was all that stood between me and homelessness. In a city like Tokyo, five million could disappear in a snap.

"Well, it's not like any of it matters anyway," I said. "Money is worthless now."

"Mhh, I guess you're right. But still..." She looked at her ten thousand yen bills. "I want to spend it. I want to get the reward I've been saving up for."

"What do you want to buy?"

"A Switch!"

"Oh, you should've said so sooner."

I got up, opened a drawer and pulled out a Switch console.

"Here, you can have this. It's almost brand new. I barely played it after buying it."

"Ehhhhhh? You had this the whole time?"

"I bought this thing because I wanted to play Monster Hunter, but I never had the time or energy to commit to a game like that."

"Is working life really that tiring?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Kind of, not really. It's not so tiring once you get used to it; you just lose the motivation to do anything else. Something in you dies.”

"Poor you," Sayaka said with a gentle smile.

She took the console and turned it on.

"You only have Monster Hunter on here!"

"I didn't have the time to play it, so I didn't buy other games. Sorry."

"The eStore is down too."

"The entire Internet is down."

She put her money in her bag.

"Yamada-san, let's go shopping!"

"Huh?"

"I've always wanted to go to a Bic Camera in Tokyo."

"Breaking into one of those big stores will be so tiring. They have more security than convenience stores."

"It'll be fine. Let’s go, come on."

She changed into a hoodie and a spare skirt she pulled out of her bag and then left the apartment. I had no choice but to follow her. It's not like there was anything else to do.

A little while later, we arrived at the big Bic Camera in Shibuya. On our way there, we stopped at the famous Shinjuku Crossing.

“It's always filled with people every time I saw it on TV," Sayaka said.

"That was before the pandemic."

"Yup, and now everyone is dead. Except for us two."

She stood in the middle of the crossing and silently gazed at all the buildings surrounding her.

Her back was turned to me. I wonder what expression she was making right now.

Eventually she turned around.

"Let's go!" she said with a smile, but it felt forced like she was trying to hide something.

Once we arrived at Bic Camera, we discovered a problem: my crowbar and sledgehammer weren’t enough to get through the thick metal shutter that protected the store. As expected, these big chain stores have better security.

"There's nothing we can do about it," I said with sweat running down my forehead.

"Hmmm...." Sayaka scratched her chin. "I have an idea. Can you wait for a bit? I'm going to go get something."

"Sure. Bring back a large bottle of water while you're at it."

“Okay." She walked a few steps and then stopped. She glanced back at me. “Don’t go anywhere, okay?”

“I’ll wait right here, don’t worry.”

“Mh, okay.” She hesitated for a few more moments, and then walked off, her figure vanishing among the buildings.

I didn't tell her where to get a bottle of water. The implied meaning was obvious. Walk into any convenience store and get something.

I sat down on the ground and waited. And waited. And waited a little more. I looked at my watch and saw that she’s been gone for almost an hour.

"What is she doing?”

Did she get lost? It’s possible for someone from outside of Tokyo to get lost in this concrete jungle. Even Tokyo natives tend to get lost sometimes.

I should’ve gone to the hardware store and gotten some walkie-talkies. It would’ve been possible to keep in touch over long distances with those. I’ll wait a little longer and see if she comes back before searching for her.

After a while, I heard the roar of an engine.

"Yamada-san! Get out of the way!!!"

A delivery truck was speeding towards me. A certain JK sat behind the wheel, and she wasn't slowing down.

"Sayaka?!"

She shouted something, but I couldn't hear her clearly.

I ran away as quickly as I could. I had no desire to be reincarnated in another world. Sayaka jumped out of the van, and the vehicle smashed into the metal shutters of the store at full speed.

Not only did it take out the metal shutter, but it also smashed apart the glass walls behind it.

"Are you okay?" I ran towards her.

"Heh-heh~ Don't worry, I did judo when I was junior high. Falling a little isn't going to hurt me."

"Thank god, you're alright."

I put my hands on her shoulders.

"Yamada-san..." Her cheeks appeared slightly flushed. "You - ouch!"

I chopped her on the head.

"What was that for?" She looked up at me with furrowed brows.

"What the hell are you thinking? Are you crazy?"

"You can’t break in with your usual equipment, so I decided to try something else."

"And driving a truck into the store is what you thought of?"

"I saw it in a zombie movie once. The main character drives a truck through a wave of zombies and nothing can stop a truck going at full speed. I figured it would be enough to break into the store and — " She peered past me, " — I was right."

"How did you even get that truck?”

"That wasn't easy. There are plenty of abandoned vehicles near the highway exit, but I needed to find something that had the ignition key still inside. Once I found a suitable vehicle, I just drove it back."

Ah, so that was why she was gone for so long.

"You really are a troublesome JK," I said with a sigh. "But good job."

"Heh-heh~" She made the peace sign.

"How did you know how to drive?"

“…my uncle who works on a farm taught me how to drive trucks when I was in junior high."

Sayaka got back into the truck (which, amazingly, still worked and hadn't blown up, proving the quality of Japanese-made vehicles) and put it in reverse.

We went into the store with our flashlights and made our way upstairs until we got to the game section.

Each floor was sealed with a metal shutter, but those were less secure than the one at the entrance, and we got past those with my convenience store method.

"Take whatever you want. It's free after all."

"Hnghh...I'm not going to do that."

I didn't know what she meant, but she vanished among the shelves before I could ask.

A little while later, she returned with a Switch console, a PlayStation, and a mountain of games. She pulled an envelope out of her bag, took the money out, and placed it on the counter.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm buying something."

I was about to say that she didn't need to do that, but the expression on her face was severe. For one reason or another, this was important to her.

"Thank you for your patronage, *Okyaku-sama*," I said and put her stuff in a bag.

"Thank you for helping me carry everything."

"It's nothing."

"Let's play multiplayer all night long."

"Sure, but I'm not very good at games."

"I used to play Mario Kart DS a lot in primary school."

"Oh, I remember that. My friends and I played that all night long on the N64."

"Whoa, that's ancient!"

"I am older than you."

"Maybe I should call you *uncle* from now on. *N64 uncle."*

"Please don't. I'm only a third year salaryman. I still have a glimmer of youth left in me."

"Only a real uncle would say something like that."

"Ugh..."

Sayaka cackled with laughter. Her shoulders shook gently.

We went home and played games all night long, and Sayaka beat me in almost everything.

"I thought you are supposed to be good at Mario Kart, how come you suck so much?" she asked.

"The controls are totally different from what I was used to in the early 2000s."

"Early 2000s — whoa."

"I know what you are thinking."

Sayaka grinned. She glanced at me and said, "Boom."

"What?"

She hit me with a red shell and once again took first place during the last lap of the race.

[Spring]

Chapter 5

The sleeping arrangement Sayaka and I had was fairly simple. I slept on my bed while she used the guest futon. It felt weird having a girl sleep on the floor while I was on the bed, so I offered to trade, but she refused.

"I get up earlier than you, so it's better this way," she said.

Incidentally, my diet improved a lot ever since we began to live together. Now that there was someone else here, I cooked more frequently. We took turns making meals (although I have to admit that her cooking was better than mine).

The food supplies in the rich guy’s fridge should last us a while.

Sayaka seemed like a regular cheerful JK who was simply born into the wrong era, and as a result of that, she never allowed herself to relax completely.

Whenever we talked about our past, it felt like she was trying to avoid certain topics.

She always kept her gun close to her, even when she was sleeping. Some part of her never quite relaxed, and she had to keep that thing by her side.

"Say, how did you get that gun?" I asked her one day after we spent the whole night playing games.

"Eh?"

"You know, the gun pointed at me. It's real, isn't it? I can tell that it isn't some sort of toy. Unlike America, Japan is really strict with civilian gun ownership, and I can't imagine a minor like you owning a gun. Which means you got it from someone else, right?

“Ehh…well..."

"Did you steal it?"

"What? No, no, no! I would never steal a gun. Why would you even think something like that? I'm a wholesome, pure hearted JK."

"Calling yourself a wholesome JK is kind of suspicious. Actually, are you even a JK?"

Sayaka pouted.

“How rude. Of course I'm a JK! Are you thinking that I might be some college girl cosplaying as a JK in order to get favors from men who have a thing for JKs?"

"Favors like guns."

"Geez, I'm not that kind of person."

She turned her back to me.

I could sense that if I didn't apologize now, she would really get mad at me.

"Sorry, I was just teasing you. But still…how did you get that gun?”

She reached into her bag and put her student ID on the table. "Do you believe me now?"

I took the card and had a look at it.

"Huh…it looks real."

"Of course, because it is real. I'm a 100% genuine wholesome JK. I'm pure and true, like the summer sun."

She made the peace sign.

"The way you say it makes you sound even more suspicious, but whatever. So, how did you get the gun?"

She pursed her lips and seemed to consider her answer for a moment. Then she opened her mouth and spoke.

"You remember the uncle who taught me how to drive a truck, right?"

"Yeah."

"He was the oddball in our family, but he always treated me kindly. I guess I was his favorite? Anyway, he always believed that the end of the world was coming and that is why he taught me how to drive."

"Huh. So he gave you the gun?"

She made a small nod.

"He worked as a police officer in Niigata. How crazy is that? He believes the world is ending, but he's working in the police force at the same time. His shed was full of food, tents, and there was even a small power generator."

"Smart man." It was also a little frightening that people like that could land a job as a police officer, but I didn't say that.

"Then when people began to discriminate and hunt down anyone who spoke with a Tokyo accent, he was worried about me since I was on my own. He said that when society falls apart, the laws and social consequences that held back the thirst men have for JKs will fall away, and the beasts will be unleashed."

"Your uncle didn't have a very high opinion of people huh...but I do understand why he might think that."

"When people began to discriminate and hunt down anyone who spoke with a Tokyo accent, he gave me the gun and told me to run."

"And what did you do?"

"I listened to him. I ran away and tried to hide. And then my classmates….well, a lot of things happened, and I ended up running away on my own. At first I saw a lot of people on the streets, and then slowly the streets became emptier until one morning there was no one on the road except me. I decided to go to Tokyo to find help because everywhere else my accent would land me in trouble."

"And that's when you met me."

"Mh-hmm."

I looked at her. Her story made a lot of sense, but something just felt off. Her voice trailed off when she mentioned her classmates and then she said she came to Tokyo to find help. If she was trying to find help, then why did she almost shoot me when we first met? I know her uncle told her to be careful, but after days of being alone on the road, shouldn't her reaction be

different? Also, how did she survive the winter on her own? Kanto winters are cold, and without shelter, she should’ve died from exposure.

There was something she wasn't telling me.

But —

What difference did it make? The reality was that society had been wiped out by this pandemic, and a third year salaryman and a third year JK are the only survivors.

"*Yosh*!" Sayaka clapped her hands together. The sudden sound ripped me out of my thoughts. "We've been playing games all night and morning."

"Right, we should get some slee — "

"Let's go take a walk."

Only a real genuine JK would want to go for a walk after pulling an all-nighter. Meanwhile, I felt like I was about to collapse. Our energy levels were completely different.

She didn't give me a chance to refuse, so I ended up going outside with her.

We strolled along the neighborhood streets. Sayaka walked in front of me with her hands behind her back. Her uniform skirt swayed slightly in the gentle wind. A pleasant late morning sun shone. The sky was endlessly blue, without a single cloud in sight, free of all pollution. The birds were lively after a silent winter. Did they migrate back to Japan for the summer?

We walked in silence until we ended up at a local park.

"Whoa, Yamada-san, look!"

It was cherry blossom season. The trees were in full bloom, forming a sea of light pink clouds. The wind suddenly picked up and a gust ruffled the blossoms, causing a cascade of pedals to float up in the air and then slowly fall to the ground like snowflakes.

The gentle scent of cherry blossoms travelled up my nose and underneath that the first hint of summer lingered, waiting for spring to pass.

"It's been a while since I've been here,” I said.

"What do you mean?"

"I grew up in this area and used to come here to view cherry blossoms every spring with my parents. After I went to university, I didn’t have the chance to come back.”

"So this is the same view you saw when you were younger?"

"Yeah."

"Hee~ So this is what you saw back in the old days."

"'*Back in the old days*’ makes it sound like it was decades ago. It's only been about ten years since I was in high school."

"Whoa, ten years! That should count as '*the old days*'."

"..."

I couldn't argue against that. Ten years was indeed a long period of time.

Back in the old days....

Damn it, her words made me feel nostalgic.

I glanced at a tree to the side. My friends and I used to go to the convenience store after school and then enjoy our drinks here. One time we sat leaning against that tree, facing away from each other and talking about which girl we liked. At that time, most boys had a girl they liked, and those who said they didn't were liars.

I remember my friend from that time, Kota, he liked the cute girl in our class, the one everyone liked. No one ever thought that he'd ever be able to go out with her, not because he was bad looking, but because the girl had so many suitors. All the popular guys in the sports club liked her too. In the end, he confessed to her with a letter he put in her shoe locker and she accepted his feelings. At that time, everyone was amazed when we saw them holding hands after school. Thinking back, they made a good match.

Kota and I lost touch after graduation, but I heard that she cheated on him with an assistant professor after they went to university. Another version of that story had him cheating on her with a college girl. Within the LINE chat groups, no one knew which one was true.

Huh…I wonder what happened to him.

"Everyone in the neighborhood used to come here for cherry blossom viewing parties," I said. "My mother would prepare some *onigiri,* and we'd join the other families."

"I see."

Hm? I thought she'd have more of a reaction to what I said since she liked to tease me about my age. Instead, her response was unusually brief.

Her eyes gazed at a small field of grass that lay between two clusters of cherry blossom trees. She seemed to be thinking about something.

For a while neither of us said anything. Then Sayaka turned to me, the red ribbon of her uniform swaying in the wind.

"*Nee*, Yamada-san. We are the only ones seeing the cherry blossoms this year. Everyone else is dead."

She said those words with a sad smile. She continued to speak.

"This used to be a gathering place for the entire neighborhood and now it's just us two. Tokyo is empty, with all of its residents dead. This city is like Laputa, the castle in the sky. It's just the remains of a world that doesn't exist anymore."

"Sayaka..."

"Yamada-san, why are we still alive? Why did we survive? If there is God up there, why do this to us? To everyone?"

Her words made me think of a line from a movie about a South African diamond smuggler.

"Will God ever forgive us for what we've done to each other?" I said.

"What do you mean, Yamada-san?"

Then I look around and I realize, God left this place a long time ago.

Most people choose not to think about it, but ten years ago there was a prior pandemic that brought the world to its knees. At that time, there were national lockdowns all over the world and many people lost their jobs. It

truly was a terrible time. I remember how my own parents had a constant look of despair on their faces. As a child, I watched news reports that claimed that it was the changes we had made to this world that caused the emergence of this pathogen.

Scientists managed to produce a vaccine just barely in time. Once that was over, everyone resumed their normal lives without thinking about what caused the disaster to begin with. We just wanted to forget about what happened and keep living the way we did. I still remember how the Japanese government encouraged us to go out and spend money in order to keep the economy going: buy more, eat more, travel more.

We continued to go to work. We kept working unpaid overtime. We kept buying and throwing things away. We forgot about what happened and pretended that everything was fine and nothing needed to change.

It’s not our fault. It’s not my fault. It was an accident. It will never happen again. Ah, I need to go to work. And the rent is due tomorrow too, what a mess.

We didn’t have the will to change. We were weak.

And now ten years later, a new virus from the depths of nature wiped out the human race.

"I wonder if this is God's way of punishing us," I said. "For everything we have done to each other and everything we have done to this planet."

"Hmm…it must be a very forgetful God."

"What makes you say that?"

"He forgot about us two."

I laughed slightly. "You're right."

We wandered around the park, and Sayaka told me some more things about what happened in Niigata. People there began to beat up or chase away people who spoke with a Tokyo accent after larger numbers of locals began to fall ill.

“People in my school got sick, and the class blamed me for it because I was the only one who spoke with a Tokyo accent. Someone spread a rumor that I visited relatives in Tokyo recently and brought the virus back to the school. No one would listen to me when I said I hadn’t been to Tokyo in years.”

"Maybe they were afraid and needed someone to blame."

"Mh."

Since we live together in a 1LDK, I unintentionally caught glimpses of her body when she was changing and saw that there were bruises all over.

At that time, she wouldn't tell me what happened when I asked her about her injuries. She simply said, "I got into some trouble with people who hated me."

Did her peers do that to her?

"That's why, when I heard that some people from my school were suffering organ failure, I didn't feel the least bit sad. I even thought, '*Serves*

you right, you bastards.'" She smiled sadly. "*Nee*, Yamada-san, I'm a horrible person, aren't I?"

Seeing her smile like that made my chest throb. A girl like her should be living her youth, not thinking these kinds of things. An expression like this didn't belong on a youthful face like hers — that could wait until adulthood.

I shook my head. "Having those kinds of thoughts is normal. We're not saints, only human. When my boss fell ill and died, I thought the same thing. Actually a lot of my colleagues felt a sense of relief. Deep down inside, we were all thinking, *'Finally this bastard is gone!'* Although I also felt disgusted with myself and my colleagues; this guy has been our boss for three years, and we felt a sense of relief when he got sick. It made me wonder if I was the good person I always thought I was."

Sayaka looked at me with a studious gaze.

"You are a good person. That is a Sayaka guarantee."

"How are you so sure?"

"You've got a cute, youthful JK in your apartment, and you've never tried to do *that* to me."

"I do have some self-control, you know."

"Hmm…is that so?"

"And what if I lifted your skirt and began touching you?"

"I'd shoot you in the head."

"Oh."

After we left the park, we broke down a vending machine and took some drinks home. We ate a simple dinner and then played games all night long.

Maybe God really did forget about us.

[Spring]

Chapter 6

Surviving the end of the world came with a certain problem: boredom.

"I'm so booooored," Sayaka sighed and dropped her Switch on the bed.

"Hmm..."

"Playing games alone is so boring. Hey, Yamada-san, play with me."

"I don't feel like it."

"Just play already."

"We've already cleared the co-op mode of every game we've taken from Bic Camera. There's nothing else to play."

"Then let's replay all the games we've cleared."

"No way, I don't want to do that."

Since the world had ended and everyone else had succumbed to the virus, there were naturally no new games coming out. We also raided a nearby movie rental store and watched all of the Blu-Rays. And since all the actors and directors were dead — well, you get the point.

As a result of bringing this stuff with us, my apartment had turned into a mess. So many Blu-Rays and games were piled up in my room and outside on the balcony.

"I always imagined JKs to be tidy," I said and looked around the room.

"Eh? The heck does that mean?"

"I just mean when I see JKs on the train, I get the impression that girls your age are always clean and tidy."

"So you're one of those creepy uncles who ogles JKs on the train? Just so you know, us girls always know when a guy is checking us out."

"What I mean is that you are messier than I thought — and no, I don't ogle JKs on the train."

Okay, I did sometimes look at JKs, but only sometimes. It's not like I had a thing for JKs specifically. As a man, when you see a pretty girl, you can't help but look — just a little. Although it's not something I would ever admit to this JK who was rolling around on my bed.

"It's okay, you can admit that you like to look at JKs. I won't judge you. I won't even blame you for it. Like I totally get it. No man can resist the charms of a cute JK. This uniform is like magic for men your age, no?"

"Shut it, you troublesome JK."

"Anyway, just play with me already."

She hated to play games alone and didn't really enjoy the single player modes all that much. It was just a hunch but...

"Sayaka, what kind of games did you like to play before the end of the world?"

"Huh? Why do you suddenly want to know?"

"I'm just curious."

"Ehh? Mmm... I usually play soshages on my phone. I really liked playing the one where you can get cute characters and..."

She began to describe one of the countless gacha soshages that were extremely popular before the player base was wiped off the face of the Earth.

Ah, I see. My hunch was right. She was from a different generation. I grew up playing single-player games (mostly RPGs) because back then, there was no such thing as Wi-Fi and connecting to the Internet via dial-up was expensive. The closest thing we had to online multiplayer back then was split-screen multiplayer for two people, or the Game Boy link cable for Pokemon matches. Either way, it required people to meet in person to play video games together.

Back then, I remember reading a lot more books than I do now. Video games were too expensive to buy every time I finished one, so I spent more time reading books, but that quickly changed when I grew up.

In university I was too busy having fun and once I started working, I had neither the time nor the energy to pick up a book. For a while I tried reading on the train, but I couldn't concentrate on the words when I could barely breathe in a packed morning train.

Sayaka grew up in an age where Wifi was more readily available than drinking water, and, therefore, all of her games involved some kind of gacha system that was tied into a multiplayer game.

"Yamada-san, are you listening to me? Just play with me already. I'm so bored I feel like I'm going to cry."

I sighed through my nose.

"Put on your outdoor clothes. I have an idea."

"Huh? Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

"Eh, what the heck..."

She put on her uniform and then followed me out of the apartment. We rode my Super Cub into the city.

To think that just a few weeks ago, she was pointing her gun at me. Now she was climbing onto my bike without even knowing where we were going.

I suppose in these types of circumstances, it is easy for two people to grow close — because there was no one else. We have no choice but to stick together. Was this what life was like when we were hunter-gatherers? Whenever you'd meet someone new in the mountains, you'd quickly become friends because it'd increase your chances of survival and combat loneliness. I wonder if that is why it is so much easier to find new friends in middle school and high school as opposed to the isolation I felt once adult life started. With everyone put into a class and forced to spend eight hours a day together, it's easy to become friends, because, in a sense, your survival depended on it.

Under normal circumstances, a JK and a twenty-six year-old salaryman like me would never talk to each other. We lived in two different worlds, and there'd be no social circumstance that would have us get to know each other (unless I was a guy who liked JKs and she did compensated dating).

I stopped outside of Shinjuku-sanchome station.

"I remember it was around here somewhere…"

Yahoo Maps stopped working a long time ago, and therefore I couldn't turn to my smartphone for directions. Honestly, it's really annoying not having satellite navigation in my pocket, but then I reminded myself that no one had satellite navigation during the Showa Era and they managed to find their way home regardless.

Maybe we of the modern era are too reliant on smartphones.

"So, what are you looking for?" she asked. "You want to raid another convenience store?"

"No, we still have more than enough supplies." I scratched the back of my head. Seriously, where was that place? "I'm looking for the Kinokuniya Shinjuku Main Store. You know, the really big one."

"Ehhh, why do you want to go to a bookstore?"

"I figured since we have gone through all the movies and games, reading some books might be a nice change."

"…ehh…"

She didn't look enthused by that idea at all.

"There's manga too."

"Oh! Well…" There was a sparkle of interest in her eyes.

After a few wrong turns, we managed to find the store. It was a monster bookstore, maybe the largest in Tokyo, which would make it the largest in all of Japan.

The metal shutters had been pulled down, but fortunately, it wasn’t locked. Whoever was the last remaining employee must've been in a hurry to leave. It also shows how little people cared about the security of this place. Why would anyone rob a bookstore?

"Huh, this place is pretty easy to get into," Sayaka commented.

"The Tokyo government declared a state of emergency out of nowhere," I said. "They must've closed this place in a hurry."

"I see."

We used flashlights to navigate the store until we found the main power switch and turned the store lights back on. Thankfully, the power grid still worked.

"Whoa!" Sayaka exclaimed.

The entire bookstore was suddenly revealed to us. A sea of shelves spread out in all directions, all the books were orderly and untouched. A layer of dust covered the books displayed on tables.

"It's kind of amazing to see a bookstore without anyone in it," I said.

"It's what bookstore employees see every night before they close the store.”

"And when it opens," I added.

We browsed the shelves together for a while, then split up. Sayaka delved into the manga section while I explored the popular fiction selection.

Come to think of it, the titles that were labeled as popular bestsellers right now would forever remain in the top charts. Humanity would not produce any more new books, at least not to this scale. I wonder if the dead authors felt pleased about that. *Look at you, you will be number one forever!*

A few of the authors I read when I was younger were still releasing new books up until the pandemic hit, so I picked up a copy of their new releases.

For the first time in a long time, I felt excited about reading a book. It reminded me of the feeling I had when I was still a child, when my parents bought me books for my birthday.

“Sayaka? Where are you?”

"Over here!"

I went over to where she was. She had ripped the plastic wrapping off some manga volumes and sat on the floor, reading.

"Normally the staff would make you pay for that," I said.

"Then it's a good thing that no one is working here anymore."

"What are you reading?"

She showed me the cover. It was a famous mystery manga that ran over a thousand chapters and received a new movie every single year. It was a series every person in Japan knew about.

"I used to read this when I was a child. You read this too?" I asked.

"My classmate lent me a few volumes, and it was interesting."

Her eyes remained glued on the page as she said that.

"Come on, let's pack up and go. I don't want to spend too much time in an empty building like this. It feels creepy."

"Huh? But I want to keep reading."

"You can do this at home."

"Hmm...but there's so many volumes."

"We can always come back and get the rest later."

"I suppose so.”

She put some volumes in her backpack, and we went outside.

Since we had come all this way already, Sayaka said she wanted to get some new clothes in Shinjuku. Without a map, neither of us was sure about where to go, so we put our books down next to the bike and began to walk around.

We took random turns here and there until we somehow ended up in the infamous Kabukicho area. Within Kabukicho there was a street filled with love hotels. It was only a few minutes away from Shinjuku-sanchome, which made it very convenient.

Huh... It has been a while since I’ve been here. There was one particular love hotel I recognized.

In my second year with the company, I was assigned to mentor a newbie who had just graduated in the fall and started working at my company in the spring.

Honestly, it was a pain to mentor a newbie while still doing my own work, but I was a second year employee: training someone was a way of testing me to see if I was worthy of a promotion at the five year mark.

I trained the newbie, and we got along well. It turned out that we graduated from the same high school, so we had lots to talk about. One night, the team went out to celebrate the completion of a major project. While everyone went to the after party, she and I made an excuse to go to the convenience store. Once we got away, we somehow ended up at a love hotel and did it without a care in the world.

Thinking about it now, both of us may have just been frustrated with the way adult life turned out to be and needed a way to relieve stress.

While drinking, she mentioned how working life is different from how she imagined it to be. After two years in the workforce, I was pretty disillusioned too.

When we left the drinking party, we walked to the convenience store and bought some water. My junior said, “Is it okay if we walk around for a bit?”

The expression on her face said that she didn’t really want to go back. In a way, I understood her feelings. People who first started working didn’t really enjoy drinking with their superiors. As the youngest one, you had to pour drinks for everyone, you had to drink yourself, and you had to stop yourself from getting drunk lest you say something careless in front of the bosses. It was a stressful experience after a stressful day at work.

We walked around the streets until we ended up at this particular street in Kabukicho. The mood was right; we walked into this love hotel almost on a whim.

Once the door closed and the electronic door lock made a beep, she put her arms around my neck and we kissed. She forced her tongue into my mouth right away and everything after that was a blur.

Afterwards, we went to a love hotel after work about once a week, but for one reason or another we didn't end up dating. Eventually, she was transferred to a different branch and that was the end of that story.

I gazed up at the love hotel where we did it for the first time. During the day, it looked like a seedy old building. A large sign with hourly rates hung outside the entrance.

Rest.

Stay.

"Why are you staring at that building?”

"Huh?" I blinked.

"You are staring at that building." Sayaka moved next to me and read the sign. “Rest…stay…what's up with these prices? This looks like some kind of hotel, but what kind of hotel charges by the hour? Shouldn’t the rates be per night?”

“Uhh…"

Sayaka clearly didn't know about love hotels. Maybe they didn't have them out in the sticks or maybe high school students in Niigata are more sheltered than the ones in Tokyo. Out there they are surrounded by rice paddies and protected from the bad moral influences of the city.

"So?"

"Right, uhm, these are hotels that rent out rooms for a few hours at a time. Usually they are for people who feel tired after shopping and want to take a nap before going home."

"Really?"

"That's right."

She looked at me and smiled with her eyes. She leaned forwards with her hands behind her back.

"Pfff —" She broke into laughter and wrapped her arms around her stomach. "You really thought I didn't know what a love hotel is? Even junior high kids know about it! And what's with your explanation? It doesn't even make sense! Who pays five thousand yen to take a nap?"

I felt my face flush red.

She leaned in and whispered into my ear. “This is where *naughty things* happen, no?”

"I-If you knew, then why did you ask me what kind of place this is?"

"Ehhh, I just wanted to tease you a little since you looked like you were lost in thought."

"You little…"

She nodded at the love hotel. "You've been to these types of places before?"

"That's none of your business."

"Ehh~ So you have, hmm? That's unexpected. You don't look like the type who goes to love hotels."

"Then what do I look like?"

"A virgin salaryman."

"Shut it. I'm a working adult. It's only natural for working members of society to go to love hotels."

Did I really look like a virgin? I thought I lost that look a long time ago. Or maybe she was just teasing me.

"Is that so? Who did you go with?"

"None of your business."

"Ehh, just tell me already."

"A colleague…"

"Ohhh, I see. A colleague. So what they say on the Internet about the modern workplace is true. Young recruits look at each other and engage in hot and steamy office romances. They work overtime, and, after the bosses are gone, they go to a love hotel to release some stress."

"What have you been reading? You're way too young to be reading those kinds of things."

"What the heck, you sound like an overprotective teacher. Everyone knows that office workers are statistically likely to hook up with each other. They did surveys about this, you know."

"Of course that will happen since we see each other at the office all day long and there is no one — "

I stopped myself. I was saying that it was normal for colleagues to hook up because those are the potential partners we are exposed to all day long. By that logic, I'd basically also be saying that people will hook up with whomever they spend the most time with outside of their family because those are the options they are exposed to.

Meaning that Sayaka and I...

No, no, no. Absolutely impossible.

"Never mind. A wholesome JK shouldn't know this kind of adult stuff to begin with."

"What the heck. It's not the Showa era anymore, you know."

I let out a sigh. "It's a perfectly nice day. Why are we talking about office hookups? Let's just enjoy this weather."

"You sound like an old man. Come on, tell me more about your office love stories."

"I was a good employee who took his work seriously. You're making me sound like some kind of wolf who goes after every cute female colleague in the office."

"You don't?"

"I am a man of integrity."

"Heee, is that so? Your face isn't half bad. Actually you're kind of good looking. There were probably a lot of women who wanted you."

"Sorry, stroking my ego isn't going to get a story out of me. And it's not like those stories are exciting. Anyway, going to love hotels and stuff is normal for adults. You know, after high school, most people don't stay virgins for long. Doing it isn't a big deal after becoming a proper adult."

Or maybe we're too casual about it, I thought. Any kind of precious innocence is lost. The youthful feelings that once inspired us are dulled and faded.

"Che, how boring."

Sayaka pouted.

We left the love hotel street and wandered around until we came across some stores. But Sayaka seemed to be in a bad mood and didn't bother breaking into any of the stores.

"Hey, didn't you want to look at some clothes?"

She walked in front of me and didn't reply.

"Hey."

No answer.

I sighed. Was she seriously mad at me for not telling her the adult stories she wanted to hear? I was the last adult in Japan and she was the last JK; it was my job to keep her shielded from this kind of stuff, even though I knew

that high schoolers these days are more mature than when my generation was still in school.

We continued to walk in silence. The streets were empty, the city deserted. There was no one but the two of us, which made her icy silent treatment even more oppressive. It was the kind of thing every man feared.

After a while she said, "I just wanted to hear a fun adult story because I will never experience any of that. Do you understand?”

I opened my mouth to reply, then closed it. It took me a moment to understand what she meant.

The human race had been wiped out when she was still in high school. She'd never graduate or go to university. She'd never enter the workforce. For better or worse, she'd never experience what life after high school is like.

She must've been looking forward to what the future held for her but now she'd never find out. Even though she was alive, her life ended in high school. It was as if time had stopped for her. That was probably why she is so curious.

"There isn't really anything to look forward to after high school," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"After high school, you either enter the workforce or go to university. After university, you start working and every day becomes the same clockwork routine. Maybe you feel like time has stopped for you right now, but once you become an adult, time stops anyway. The days blend together and the years pass by with you barely noticing it."

"...but isn't life more interesting because you are finally free?"

I smiled wryly. That too is what I thought when I was her age. To get away from my parents, my teachers, that little world that is high school. To go out there and experience the world. To be free.

"Most people live and work aimlessly," I said. "You end up being too busy with work to seriously think about any goals in life." And, after a moment, I added, "You have to earn money in order to live. To earn money you have to work, and when you work, you have to listen to your boss. Work will end up consuming every waking moment, and even if you try your best to get off work on time, you will always somehow end up working overtime. Having one or two hours to yourself after work is considered pretty good. Although that time is mostly spent commuting back and forth. In the end, you’re not really free.”

I let out a profound sigh. "I'd say that most people were probably the happiest during their youth, when they were innocent students and the world was full of color. The world beyond that is nothing to look forward to — just grey and murky boredom.”

Sayaka didn't say anything for a long time. She looked at me with a pensive gaze and eventually said, "Is that why you don't care about your lost money? If money is what kept you tied down, then money becoming worthless is the ultimate liberation."

I raised both eyebrows. I didn't expect a JK to be able to understand the deeper implied meaning of what I wanted to say.

Sayaka furrowed her brows. "That look on your face is saying, 'I totally didn't expect this stupid JK to understand a word of what I just said'."

"I never thought of you as stupid, but I am surprised."

"Hnghhh! Feeling surprised is the same as thinking of me as stupid. You totally thought that a cute and wholesome JK like me couldn't understand anything profound. Am I so cute that you automatically think of me as an airhead? You men are seriously so biased. Cute girls are smarter than they let you know, they just pretend to be dumb because you men like it."

"Calling yourself cute is really weird — anyway, that's not the point. And I don't think you're cute. You're just a brat in my eyes."

"Heee, just a brat, huh?"

"That's right."

"You've hurt my feelings. I am deeply hurt. My heart has been wounded. I will forgive you if you tell me one of your love hotel stories."

She said those words with a smile in her eyes. She wasn't hurt at all.

I sighed and gave up.

"Alright, when I entered my second year at the company, I was assigned to train this newbie, and then..."

I told her about what happened, and her eyes grew wider with every sordid detail.

"So you two just went to the love hotel?"

"Oh-hooo! How bold!"

"Seriously? At the office too?! On the desk? How naughty!”

What the hell was I doing…telling a JK these kinds of stories after the end of the world.

Well, at least there is no one around to judge me for it.

"And you never tried to contact her after she got transferred?"

I shook my head. "It just felt like that was the end of it. I think we both felt that way because she never sent me a message either."

"Hmm...you might be right."

"Hey, it's not fair that only I am telling stories. What about you?"

"Hmm?"

Sayaka immediately averted her gaze.

"Any love stories you want to share?"

"Ehh..."

"Did you have a boyfriend before?"

"That's a secret."

"..."

"Come on, let's go rob that store over there. You should get some new clothes too. Your Uniqlo stuff looks kind of lame."

"My Uniqlo stuff looks great. And don't change the topic — "

Before I could finish my sentence, she grabbed my sledgehammer and smashed apart the window of one of the fashion stores. A shrill alarm immediately sounded.

"What the hell? Why is there an alarm?" Sayaka shouted.

"It must be connected to some kind of battery! It's just bad luck! Don't worry! Even with the alarm, no one will stop us!”

"Okay!"

We went into the store and grabbed as much as we could even though there was no police to arrest us. Somehow the crying alarm made it feel like we were committing a real robbery. The whole thing felt immoral and exciting.

After we finished at that store, we broke into another place and got some things for me as well. It was mostly Sayaka who picked out some shirts, jackets and trousers for me since "your sense of fashion is horrible, so just leave it to Sayaka."

At first I felt a little insulted, but after putting on the outfits she selected, I had to admit that she had better taste than I did.

Afterwards, we broke into a shoe store. Sayaka tried on the latest high tech sneakers that were advertised on TV before commercials stopped playing. She said wearing those shoes felt like 'walking on air'.

I got myself a pair of normal sneakers, since we'd be doing a lot of walking.

With our plunder on our backs, we went back to Shinjuku-sanchome station and drove home.

[Spring]

Chapter 7

Living with Sayaka is pretty great — for the most part.

Her cooking is better than mine, so over time she naturally took over cooking duties while I was relegated to clean up duty. I still tried to cook something for us every now and then, mainly out of the sheer guilt that came from seeing a JK do all the cooking. I mean, I was the adult here, and it felt like she was the one taking care of me.

Despite the fact that the rest of the country was dead, I was blessed with eating a cute JK's home cooked meals.

The issue of boredom was also solved.

When the Internet went down last year, and UTube and social media became unavailable, I felt a constant nagging in my mind. I'd find myself reaching for my phone all the time and then being reminded that the Internet died a long time ago.

I told Sayaka about this during one of our nightly walks.

"It's like a nicotine addict cutting himself off from smokes," she said.

"Huh, you used to smoke?"

She shook her head. "But Yamada-san, you still smoke."

"I guess I do."

I tried not to do it in front of her, but I wasn't able to give up my Lucky Stars. It's not like I needed to smoke an entire pack every day, so I figured it was fine.

"Have you thought about quitting?"

“Erm…sometimes, but there’s no good reason to."

"I see."

Sayaka wrinkled her nose as she said that.

Hmm, I did read on online forums before that women hate sitting next to men who had just smoked because our clothes and breath smelled like cigarettes.

"I'll try to smoke less," I said.

"Good, good." She smiled.

Instead of the Internet, we simply watched movies we took from rental stores. Once we went through that, we raided the Kinokuniya in Shinjuku and brought home tons of manga and novels.

Since we had all the time in the world and nothing to do beyond going out to gather supplies, we went through the manga volumes pretty quickly. And once those were gone...

"Ugh...reading books is boring," Sayaka said.

She was leaning against the bed, her head hanging back and her hands holding a book in the air.

"You've barely even tried reading it."

"I've started reading, and there's only a bunch of words. There aren't any pictures."

“Of course books only have words. You’re thinking of children’s books or a manga or a light novel."

"Oh, do we have any light novels?"

"I don't read those, so I didn't bring any with me. We can go back to the book store and get some.”

"Eh…going back to Shinjuku is such a pain. Hey, how about we move to a place in the city? You know one of those glitzy condo high rises for rich people."

"I thought about that before. But Tokyo gets so many earthquakes, and I don't want to be surrounded by tall buildings when one hits. We’re safer in a normal neighborhood like ours.”

"Ehh…you're no fun. I've always wanted to stay at one of those expensive hotels and see the Tokyo night view while drinking a glass of champagne."

"We could go to one of those expensive hotels, but I don’t want to risk getting stuck in an elevator.”

"…I guess so."

Sayaka returned to her book with a sullen look on her face.

“What are you reading?”

“A book about cults in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. It talks about how people get lured into these things because they are tired of work and then get brainwashed.”

"Do you like the book?"

"Not really, it's boring."

Despite saying that, she kept on reading anyway. Soon after that, she was entirely absorbed in it and spent the entire morning focused on it. It was my first time seeing her this quiet and focused on one thing. When she read manga or played video games, she tended to constantly make comments, as though the characters could hear her.

Living with Sayaka was great — for the most part.

We kept each other company, ate together, and slept side by side.

But there was one thing that bothered me.

Ever since we began to live together, I haven't been able to do *that* kind of thing. The thing all healthy men need to do at least once in a while.

We lived in the same apartment, so I obviously couldn't do that in front of her. I didn't dare to do it while she was in the bath because I didn't know when she might come out, and she might be able to smell the tissues once she came out. I read somewhere that girls possessed especially sharp noses when it came to that kind of thing. On top of that, I couldn't get in the mood for it when I was in the bath.

The only other option was to do it outside of the apartment. But Sayaka and I always stepped out together, never more than a few steps apart. I couldn't look at good old fashioned adult magazines at the convenience

store either because we raided those together. I thought about discreetly taking a few magazines with me when she wasn't looking, but where would I hide those in the apartment? Sooner or later, she'd find them. And when she did, it would make the atmosphere really awkward. I couldn’t even run or hide because we were the last two people.

We've been living together for almost a month now. Which meant I was just about ready to burst…

I needed to find a chance to get a bit of my alone time. Right now, Sayaka was focused on her book about cults. This was the perfect opportunity.

"I'm going out for a smoke," I said and stood up.

"Oh, will you be gone for long?"

“I’m almost out of Lucky Stars, so I’ll go raid the convenience store while I’m outside, maybe I’ll walk around for a bit. I might be gone for an hour or so."

"In that case, I'll come with you." She put the book down, stood up, and smoothed out her skirt. She said those words like the decision had already been made, like it was the most natural thing in the world for her to go with me.

"You don't have to. It's fine."

She gave me a suspicious look.

Ugh…did she catch on to what I really wanted to do?

"It'd be bad if we got separated," she said. "What if you get attacked by a wild animal while you're outside? There'd be no one to help you. We only have each other."

The other day we came across a pack of feral dogs. At one point we even saw a brown bear. It seemed that now that spring was almost over, more and more animals began to fill the void left behind by us humans while they were hibernating.

All of those animals ran away when they saw us, probably because they still instinctively feared man. This probably wouldn't last very long. Once they realized that the king of the food chain had vanished, Sayaka and I would turn into prey.

"You really don't have to...it's fine..."

"Hmm? Am I a bother?"

“No, no, of course not."

"Then let's go." She went to the door and put on her shoes.

Ugh... She had me cornered. Without a choice, I went out of the door and followed her.

For a while we wandered around the quiet neighborhood. We came across a stray cat, and it came up to us the moment it saw us. Sayaka wanted to touch it because it looked cute, but I advised her against it.

“Ehh? Why not?”

“Cats might have worms or lice. It’d be a tricky situation if one of us got infected with a parasite.”

“Right…”

Sayaka pouted with disappointment, and she shooed away the cat who meowed and seemed hurt by the rejection.

I’m sorry Neko-chan. I’m sure all the lost souls of Japan are cursing me from up above, but avoiding injuries is now more important than ever.

We continued to walk around and we eventually ended up at an artificial embankment. The grass has grown lush and green, thick like a carpet. White daisies were sprinkled across the green. In the distance, I could see a small bridge going across the river.

We sat down on a bench. A few ducks landed on the grass and immediately waddled into the river.

"These types of ducks leave Japan when it gets cold and come back right before summer," Sayaka said.

“Huh, how do you know that?”

“That book about cults mentioned a cult that uses the migration patterns of animals to do fortune tellings.”

“That’s weird…”

"I wonder which part of the world these ducks came from."

"Probably somewhere warm, like Africa or Australia."

"Can they even fly that far?"

“Remember the nature documentary we watched two weeks ago? It talked about how there are wind corridors that birds can instinctively identify and they use those to travel around the world."

"Hmm, I don't really remember that. Let's watch it again when we get home."

"Sure."

We continued to gaze at the ducks floating on the river as if everything was normal, seemingly unaware of what had happened to the world. Maybe they were expecting passersby to feed them bread?

Sorry ducks, all the passersby in the world are dead. There are no kind old ladies bringing you stale bread. This salaryman and this JK don’t have any bread to spare either.

Come to think of it, these ducks would’ve seen how the pandemic unfolded in different parts of the world. I wonder how it went down in other countries. Too bad these ducks couldn’t talk. It would make for an interesting conversation.

After a while, Sayaka said, "I wonder what the rest of the world is doing. Are they all like Japan with everyone dead? Do you think there are survivors somewhere out there?"

"Before the Internet went out, I read that rioting and looting had started in America and China. The Western European countries like Germany and France held on for a little longer, but they collapsed before autumn even arrived.”

"Hmm...I didn't have the chance to read up on stories like that when I was in Niigata. Is there anything else?"

"The most interesting story came from Korea, actually. I read that South Koreans poured across the border into North Korea. There were rumors that North Korea was virus free because it was such an isolated country. The North Korean soldiers were ordered to shoot those crossing the border, but eventually they were overrun. Even if North Korea was virus free, they aren't anymore."

"So there really are no survivors? Not even in North Korea?"

I shrugged. "There are rumors that Okinawa still has some survivors because they banned flights from mainland Japan almost immediately. The Pacific island countries are also pretty isolated, so they might've survived. Oh, and there was a rumor that the people on the Matsu Islands survived, but it's just an unconfirmed rumor."

"Then there is hope, right?"

I shook my head.

"That is probably a false rumor. Civilian flights were banned, but Okinawa has the largest American military base in Japan. Even if tourists didn't bring in the virus, the steady flow of American military personnel would've done it."

"...I see."

Neither of us said anything for a while. The ducks paddled around, carefree and blissfully unaware. I looked up at the sky and saw a flock of birds flying across us. Just like these ducks and the bears we saw a few days ago, these birds were just following their natural instincts. They lived their lives like before, going from season to season, unperturbed by the changes around them, or maybe these changes were actually beneficial for the animals.

Time moved forward for them, though time had stopped for humanity.

Next to me, Sayaka touched the corner of her eyes. I realized that she was crying.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to make it sound so depressing. There might still be survivors out there, people like me and you."

"Mm, it's not your fault."

"Maybe we are both immune, or we are both extremely lucky. Maybe we will meet other survivors one day."

"I'd rather it just be..."

Her voice turned into an inaudible whisper.

"Hm? What did you say?"

"Mm, it's nothing."

She smiled bashfully. Her long black hair glittered in the afternoon sunlight. The ribbon of her uniform swayed gently. In this moment she looked incredibly beautiful.

"Yamada-san."

"What?"

"Aren't you going to smoke?"

"Ah..." I reached into my pocket and realized that I left my pack of Lucky Stars at home since I was distracted by that other thing on my mind. “I forgot them at home. Anyway, I want to try smoking less."

"Good boy." After a moment, she added, "But it's rare for you to forget your smokes."

"I suppose so..."

I couldn't tell her that I forgot about them because I was distracted by the need between my legs.

"I'm sorry," Sayaka said.

"Hmm? Why are you apologizing?"

"I knew you wanted to be alone, but I forced you to let me come with you." She then said in a whisper, "The absolute silence of this place is so scary..."

I looked at her. In that moment she looked incredibly vulnerable.

“Don’t worry, I won’t abandon you," I said with a serious tone.

"Do you promise?"

“Yeah."

She looked at me, studied me, something in her expression told me that she wasn’t satisfied. There was something else she wanted to know.

"Then why did you try to go out on your own?"

"Well...uhm..."

“Hmm? Tell me.”

"You know...every man has urges that need to be taken care of."

"What do you mean — ah..."

Sayaka blinked, and there was realization in her eyes. A moment later, her face flushed red, and she inched away from me.

"Hey! Don't treat me like a pervert! This is perfectly normal for a healthy man!"

"I-I-I k-know! I'm just surprised to hear that you see me in that way."

"I do *not* see you in that way! You're just a brat. It's just a natural urge that starts to build up."

She looked away and said nothing. The ducks quacked, as though they were enjoying this conversation.

"What if...," she said, her voice quiet. "What if I said I was okay with it? Would you do it?"

Her eyes were on the ground, her hands balled into fists and resting on her skirt.

"Sayaka..."

She said nothing. She was waiting for an answer.

"No, I would never touch you."

"Eh?" She looked at me, surprise in her eyes. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"But why? Am I not attractive? Or am I just not your type?"

"No...but..."

It was difficult to admit it to myself, but Sayaka's existence was the one thing that kept me from sinking into despair. I was alone before the end of the world. I never talked to my neighbors, rarely met friends, and my colleagues and I were only friends within the office. After the end of the world, I was still alone. I don’t know how long I could’ve endured being alone like that. I might've even killed myself just to end this loneliness. In a way, meeting Sayaka saved me.

Sayaka and I weren't lovers. We were never even supposed to meet in the first place. So for us to do that kind of thing…it wouldn't feel right. I didn't want to taint this precious bond that we shared.

"Why? Tell me," she urged me.

"I just want for things to stay the way they are."

"I see…"

She moved closer to me, closing the distance between us. Our shoulders almost touched. I could smell the gentle scent of her hair and feel the warmth of her shoulders.

Then she leaned against me and rested her head on my shoulder. Neither of us said anything.

"Your balls aren't going to explode from this little bit of contact, right?"

"Of course not. I'm not some virgin."

"Tell me if you're about to explode, and I will move far away. Ah, and you better wash your pants yourself."

"You're so mean."

"Heh-heh, poor you~"

We stayed like this, enjoying each other's presence.

"*Nee,* Yamada-san."

"What?"

“The weather is nice.”

I smiled.

“Yeah.”

[Spring]

Chapter 8

[Sayaka]

Yamada-san doesn't seem like a bad guy. Even though I pointed a gun at him the first time we met, he didn't hold it against me.

When I entered his apartment, I pretended to fall asleep. Actually I had the gun hiding underneath my shirt and made sure to lie down in such a way that exposed my thighs. If he tried to touch me, I would've shot him without hesitating — but instead, he put a blanket over my legs and murmured something about catching a cold.

That surprised me.

I didn't think that he would do that. I mean, I think I'm pretty cute. That is just an objective assessment. My friends used to tell me about the guys who had a crush on me and several of those guys have confessed to me. On Valentine's Day, there were always rumors about which boy I had given chocolates to, though I only ever gave out giri-chocos. Even then, some boys would fight over who would get some.

I fully realize that it's a good thing to be cute, and usually there would be almost no downsides. But in times like these, it is actually dangerous to be cute with a large chest and nice legs (I could always feel the boys in my class stealing glances at my chest and I knew that they ranked the girls by their three sizes, which I always thought was a little bit too childish of them).

Over the next couple of days, Yamada-san didn't try to touch me either. He was behaving so much like a gentleman that I lost a bit of confidence. Did he really feel nothing? No way, right? Was it possible that I just couldn't compare to the mature charm of the women he usually hooks up with?

But then I noticed him glancing at my legs and chest whenever he thought I wouldn't notice, and I breathed a sigh of relief. All was right in the world.

I wondered when he'd try something, but he never tried to touch me and never even tried to make a move on me. He treated me as a regular roommate.

It was a little strange. Doesn't he have any libido? I never even noticed any tissues in the wastebasket after I came out of the bath (that's what I read on a net blog post for girls who are worried that their boyfriend lost interest in them — check his wastebasket for tissues and smell it to find out if he has lost interest in you).

I also noticed that he'd cast sidelong glances at dirty magazines whenever we broke into a convenience store. Since I was around, he couldn't read them. It is probably a little cruel of me, but I kind of enjoyed

watching him struggle like that. And it made me a little happy that he was holding back for my sake.

When Yamada-san tried to go out on his own, I knew what he intended to do, and I still forced him to take me with him. I knew I was being cruel and unfair. But…I didn't want to be left behind. The terror that overcame me when I thought about being alone made me want to throw up.

I'm sorry, Yamada-san. I'm sorry for being so selfish. For now, please bear it.

Afterwards, we left the artificial riverbank and went to a convenience store. Since we were already outside, it made sense to clean out a store we had marked out on a map earlier.

"I'll go get the bottled water from the backroom. Can you take care of the cup ramen?" Yamada-san asked.

"Sure. Do you need help with the water? It's pretty heavy."

"It'll be fine. I still have my pride as a man."

"Heee…"

I let Yamada-san keep his pride, and he wandered off into the backroom.

Let's see…the cup noodles are on this shelf.

…

But instead I looked at the magazines.

The newspapers and magazines all had the same month printed on them. June. That was the month when society ceased to function and everything went into lockdown.

Next to the newspapers were the gravure and adult magazines Yamada-san wanted. I didn't even know convenience stores sold this kind of stuff in this day and age since all of this could be found online. Who even buys this stuff? Old men who didn't know how to use the Internet? It's kind of amazing that convenience stores displayed these things out in the open like that.

O-Of course I don't know that from experience. I just heard some friends talk about how their boyfriends still look at this kind of stuff online, and it really annoyed them.

I picked up a copy and flipped through it.

Heee…

All of these women were curvy and beautiful. These pictures were clearly photoshopped though.

So this is the kind of stuff guys like to look at. Whoa, her boobs are ridiculous. Is this what guys want?

I was pretty confident about my chest size, but I was pretty small compared to the model in the magazine.

This is clearly just some kind of male fantasy.

And then —

Whoa.

I noticed that the majority of these magazines featured models in high school uniforms. Is JK cosplay really that popular? That would mean that the majority of guys have a thing for JKs, right?

Did Yamada-san have a thing for JKs? Was I torturing him by wearing this uniform in front of him?

Hmm…

Well, whatever.

How surprising. I did kind of expect giant boobs and swimsuits and maid costumes, but I never expected to see the overwhelming majority of pictures to feature adult models cosplaying as JKs.

It's kind of creepy, to be honest…

Like this is what guys jerk off to?

Weird…

"Alright, that's the first box!"

Yamada-san came out of the storage room and put a box on the counter.

"Sayaka? What are you doing?"

"N-Nothing! I was looking at the newspapers."

"Oh, okay. Don't forget about the cup ramen. I like the one with the spicy flavor."

"G-Got it!"

He went back into the storage room.

Geez…that startled me. I managed to hide the magazine behind my back at the last minute. What would he think if he saw me looking at that kind of stuff…

I quickly put the magazine back.

Yosh…let's stock up on cup ramen.

On my way to the shelf containing the cup ramen, I noticed a different shelf. A shelf contained boxes that were slightly larger than playing cards. They had numbers like 0.01 and 0.02 printed on them.

Ah…

I remember going into a convenience store and watching my friends buy them. They said that when you have a boyfriend and start doing it, it's better to have a box of these in your bag when you go out on dates.

"Guys can be stupid and sometimes forget to bring some. It's embarrassing to bring these as a girl, but things can get a little hot and heavy," my friend said when she shoved a box of these along with some money into my hands and begged me to go to the counter in her stead.

I wasn't so naive as not to know what these were for.

I reached out and picked up a small red box. 0.01. *Made in Japan* was printed in English on the front.

Huh…I guess I should…just in case…

…wait a minute…

What was I doing?

It's not like I'd need something like this. Yamada-san and I weren't like *that*.

But…it was just the two of us. What if something like that did happen? And he isn't bad looking. Sooner or later, we'd do *that* sort of thing, right? Men and women both had their needs after all.

Guys can be stupid and sometimes forget to bring some.

If Yamada-san forgot to put one on, it'd certainly be troublesome.

But…

I don't think Yamada-san will touch me like that. I don't have proof that he'll always be a gentleman (I mean, he was spending every minute of every day in the presence of a cute, youthful JK) and maybe his libido will get the better of him one day, and he'll push me down. But…I felt that he wasn't that sort of person. I believe — no, I wanted to believe — that he could control himself.

"Sayaka?"

I quickly put the red box back.

"Sorry, I was just looking at some stuff."

"Actually…the water is kind of heavy. Can you help me out?"

"Okay~"

I skipped over and helped Yamada-san carry the remaining boxes of water.

[Summer]

Chapter 9

Summer arrived. A sweltering, oppressive heat washed through Tokyo, turning every surface into a frying pan. I know that is true because Sayaka tried it out.

"Yamada-san, look."

She cracked open an egg and it sizzled on the pavement. A few moments later, it was cooked and theoretically edible.

"We're running out of food, so please don't do that."

"Ehh? I saw it once in a viral video. Some guy in Shanghai did it during a heatwave. There was also another guy in Korea who fried a steak using the pavement in Seoul."

"Don't waste any more food, please…"

"*Che*, you're no fun. Why are you in such a bad mood?"

"It's just so hot…"

Sayaka and I have been enjoying nice meals almost every single day, and as a result of that, the fridge in the basement of the rich guy was running dangerously low on supplies. We were already out of frozen fish and still had some pork and beef left.

There was plenty of rice though. But with the heat building up, that rice might turn moldy.

Sayaka and I were outside in the middle of the afternoon because she wanted to try frying an egg.

"At least the air is nice and fresh," I murmured.

I hadn't really noticed it until now, but because there were no cars on the road (because all the drivers are dead), the air quality in Tokyo has improved a lot over the past year. In fact, sometimes the air smelled like we were standing in the middle of a pristine forest.

"Sayaka, let's go home. It's too hot."

"Okay."

It has been almost exactly a year since the pandemic wiped out the human race. Last summer, the government gave the order for everyone to stay at home. Some people listened, and some fled to the countryside. According to Sayaka, the people who fled to the countryside got beaten and killed by the locals because they believed that Tokyoites brought the virus with them.

Over the course of summer and the fall, the city became quieter and quieter, until eventually there was no one left but me.

I spent the last days of fall and early winter knocking on different doors, hoping to find some survivors. But no one ever answered.

And then I met Sayaka in the spring.

We went home, and as soon as I opened the door, we were greeted by a wave of pleasant cold air.

"This feels so good," I said as I sat down.

"It's too cold," Sayaka said and reached for the AC remote.

"Ehh, no, it's perfect."

"It's too cold." She adjusted the temperature. In the end, her word was law. "Hmm? The remote isn't making a sound when I press the buttons."

"Maybe it needs a change of batteries."

"The spare batteries are in that drawer, right?"

“Yeah, ugh...I'm sticky all over. I'm going to take a shower."

"Why not a bath?"

"I'd rather take a bath in the evening. Taking a shower during the day feels more appropriate."

"Heee, I see..."

I went to the bathroom, took off my clothes and threw them in the basket.

Oh right, I forgot to turn on the light.

–?!

I tried turning on the bathroom light, but flipping the switch did nothing. It remained dark.

A sinking feeling slid down my throat and stayed in my stomach.

I stepped into the shower and…

There was no water. I tried several times, but no water would come out.

And then —

"Yamada-san, I switched the remote batteries and it still won't work; the AC is broken."

Sayaka came into the bathroom.

"Hey! I'm naked."

"O-Oh — " Her face flushed red and she turned around. "S-Sorry."

She stumbled out of the bathroom. I’m pretty sure she saw…

I quickly put on my clothes and went back to the room.

"The bathroom lights don't work and there is no water pressure," I said.

"Do you think...?"

"Sayaka, take your Switch and try to charge it."

"O-Okay."

She plugged the console in and — nothing. No green light. No charging icon.

The thing I feared the most has finally happened.

"The power is out," I said.

"Then..."

"It will probably stay that way. Argh...damn it!"

Actually, it’s kind of amazing that Tokyo's power grid worked for an entire year without any maintenance. But everything has to come to an end eventually.

"What do we do now, Yamada-san?"

"Let me think..."

My heart pounded in my chest. Suddenly, I felt more desperate and scared than when I was alone during the winter and my neighbors died one

by one. Without electricity and water, this apartment was no different from a cave. In just one moment, we tumbled down the ladder of civilization and ended up in the stone age.

"Yamada-san..."

Suddenly, Sayaka hugged me from behind. I could feel her generous chest press against my back.

"Sayaka?"

"Calm down. We'll be alright. We're here together, right? It will be okay."

I took a deep breath. Calm down. I'd be a failure of an adult if I let a JK worry about me.

"For now, let's stock up on water. There won't be any running water because the pumps require electricity. We'll need a lot of water for drinking, showering and the toilet."

"Okay."

We got out the map and listed out the untouched convenience stores we had mapped out. Once we came up with an efficient route, we boarded my Super Cub and raided the convenience stores harder than ever before.

Even as we packed away the water, I knew that this was the beginning of the end. The comforts of modern life have now been truly taken away. We wouldn't be able to stay in Tokyo for much longer.

I could already sense it. There was an undercurrent in the air, a smell that was weak but steadily growing stronger with the rising heat of summer.

Our life together until now had been a temporary blessing, a fantasy that kept the severity of reality at bay. This was the moment when the fantasy ended and reality came crashing down on us.

After an exhausting day of hauling water from convenience stores, Sayaka and I were covered in sweat.

"Yamada-san, you smell. Go take a shower."

"You also smell."

"That's rude to say to a girl. I don't smell. And even if I did, you should like it. I read somewhere that men like the smell of sweaty girls."

"What kind of things have you been reading...anyway, I'd love to take a shower, but there is no water pressure."

"You can use a wet towel to wipe yourself down. Mix it with some shower gel and it will be just like taking a bath."

"I suppose that's our only option for now."

I went into the bath and used my phone as a flashlight since there was no power and no window in the bathroom. The battery was at forty percent.

For now, we have several battery packs, but how long would that last?

While wiping myself down, I thought about the things we needed.

A source of fire that can be used for both cooking and heat in the winter. A steady supply of water. Some way to replenish our food supplies. Maybe some kind of diesel generator for power if we could find one.

Right now it was summer, but Tokyo would get cold during the winter. Would we be able to survive without heating? Maybe, but it would be nothing but suffering. We'd spend the entire winter huddled around a fire rather than have any semblance of enjoying life.

If it was just me, I'd tough it out, but I didn't want to see Sayaka suffer.

How do I make life more comfortable for both of us now that we've tumbled down to the stone age?

Argh…

"Yamada-san, are you alright? You've been in there for a long time."

Sayaka stood outside the bathroom door. I could hear some rustling sounds.

"Y-Yeah, I was just — never mind, I'll be done in a second."

"Okay. Uhm…I can wash your back for you if you want."

I forgot to breathe for a moment. What was she thinking?! If she did that, there'd be no way I could keep my thing down. She would definitely see it. And in the first place, a JK should know better than to expose herself like this. Men are wolves, you know?

"It's fine, I'm already done."

"O-Okay," she said.

Maybe it was my imagination, but she sounded slightly disappointed from behind the door.

That first night without electricity was the worst night of my life. Without the AC, the apartment became a heat box, and we had to open the windows. But as soon we did that, mosquitoes and other night time bugs flew in. We tried turning on the liquid mosquito exterminator, but since there was no power, it didn't turn on.

“Yamada-san…I already know the answer, but I’m going to ask, just in case.”

“What?”

“Can you fix the power grid? Do you have some special electrician skills that you’ve kept hidden from me for mysterious reasons?”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but no. Outside of the office, away from the computer screen, I am quite useless. Most of us white collar workers have no life skills, and we depend on laundry stores and restaurants and plumbers and doctors and electricians and carpenters.”

“I see, so that’s why your laundry was all wrinkly before I showed up.”

“…I never iron my shirts, so…”

“Hee…”

In the end, both Sayaka and I endured a sleepless night.

"We need to get a fan," Sayaka said the next morning.

"We need to find one that's battery operated."

"And a mosquito coil, those that don't need electricity."

"Let's stock up on batteries too."

"Good idea."

We spent all day gathering the needed supplies. Sayaka suggested that we find a diesel power generator so that we could charge our electronic devices, but unfortunately we weren't able to find one of those in Tokyo.

"My uncle has one in his shed in Niigata; he bought one in case the world ended, according to him."

"I don't think people in the city prepare for the end of the world. We tend to think that life will always be like this, and we just worry about getting to work on time."

We ransacked Akihabara, and in the end we found a solar charger, which would be enough to charge our phones and game consoles. But both of us have gotten used to reading books, so there wasn't much use for that.

"We'll need a diesel generator if we want to get the AC and fans working," I said.

Sayaka let out a resigned sigh.

We returned home with a couple of battery operated fans. Since we couldn't charge any of them, we just used them up until they were out of power and then switched to a new one.

Sayaka and I each sat in front of a fan, enjoying the brief relief from the heat.

"My relatives in the countryside used to call us city folk weaklings who will die without air conditioning," I said. "Now I understand what they meant by that."

"You had relatives in the countryside?"

Her long black hair fluttered.

"I used to visit my relatives during the summer when I was a kid. Those visits stopped once I entered high school and began to focus on getting into university. Once that happened, I lost touch with my cousins."

"That's such a shame. Wouldn't you want to see them again?"

I shrugged. "Not really. Life goes on and everyone is busy. My parents still visited them sometimes, but I was always busy with university assignments, and, afterwards, I was always busy with work."

"I see." After a moment, she added, "I think it's going to rain tonight."

"How do you know?"

"I can smell it."

"You can smell rain?"

"Can't you? There's that smell...that wet rain smell in the air right before it will start."

"Huh...I suppose so? I never really noticed."

"Geez, you city folk are so..."

"You sound like an old farmer complaining about Tokyoites."

"Heh-heh~" Sayaka's shoulders shook with laughter.

That night, the rainy season arrived. A torrential rain hammered down on Tokyo, like the water had been gathering up in the sky and was finally being released.

It was so loud that neither of us could sleep.

"Ugh... There is no way I can fall asleep like this," Sayaka said. She sat up on her futon, her hair disheveled. The top buttons of her pajamas were undone. I could see her white shoulders.

"Yeah," I agreed and tried to avert my eyes, but my gaze was drawn to her skin. “At least the rain will cool down the temperature.”

"I have an idea."

"Hmm?"

Sayaka grabbed two chairs from the kitchen and dragged them to the balcony.

"What are you doing?"

"Since we can't sleep and it's too dark to read a book, we might as well enjoy the rain."

"Is that something people do?"

"Yeah, when there is nothing to do, isn't it nice to watch the rainfall?"

"I guess so..."

Before the pandemic, there rarely was ever a time when there was nothing to do. Every minute of every day was filled with work and weekends were spent catching up on sleep. Spending time watching the rain was something nobody in a city like Tokyo had time to do.

We sat on the balcony and watched the rainfall. After a little while, the heavy rain slowed down and the drops thinned out.

I glanced at Sayaka. I could hear her gentle breathing; her chest rose and fell slowly. Looking at her like this, I couldn't help but think about the past, a time when I still wore a school uniform. When life wasn't so hard and each day brought something new.

How nostalgic.

I wondered what it might've been like if we were classmates. Would we have been friends? Or would we have ignored each other for three years?

"Yamada-san?" Sayaka glanced at me, and we made eye contact. "Is there something on my face?"

I couldn’t turn my eyes away. I breathed in the scent of rain and suddenly my body felt light.

"You're staring at me." There was a hint of a smile at the corners of her lips. For a moment, I forgot to breathe. She was incredibly beautiful.

I needed to find something to talk about.

"Summer has finally arrived," I said.

"Hmm...you're right. I suppose summer holidays will start soon, if school still existed, that is."

"Shouldn't you be studying for entrance exams?"

Sayaka laughed gently. “I guess that is one good thing about the end of the world. I don't have to study anymore. There are no more tests, no university entrance exams…nothing."

She held her hand out, allowing some raindrops to land on her hand. "Yamada-san, what did you usually do during summer holidays?"

"You forget that I was a salaryman; we don't get summer holidays. Summer is just a season that made the required suit unbearable to wear."

Sayaka chuckled. "Poor you~ At least now you don't need to wear one anymore."

"What did you do during your summers?" I asked.

"Hmm...I don't think there was anything special. I worked a part-time job and then went to the beach with my friends. Although..."

She glanced at me.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Some of my friends had a crush on a group of senpais and they invited us to join us on that trip. In the end, it was five girls and five guys. I thought it was supposed to be a trip with just friends, so I was surprised when the trip turned into a mixer."

"I'm pretty sure the guys were excited to go on a beach trip with a group of cute kohais."

“I thought the senpais would be more mature than the boys in my class since they are older, but they were all the same; they couldn't stop looking at my chest and butt."

"Well…I suppose guys at that age are just like that.”

I decided not to mention that guys of all ages are like that.

"My friends liked that kind of attention though. They all bought new bikinis so that they could show off in front of the guys. They paired themselves up, and it was kind of awkward for me when they began to hook up in the hotel room. Although it was expected for something like that to happen since that is what they were aiming for."

"Wow... Kids these days actually do this kind of stuff, huh…how bold…”

Sayaka looked at me.

“Huh? What?” I said.

She slapped my shoulder.

"Ouch! What was that for?"

"You're supposed to say, 'Poor Sayaka, how could your friends abandon you like that just to hook up with some boys? Your friends are the worst.'"

"Oh, okay. I understand. Poor Sayaka, how could your friends — ouch!"

She slapped my shoulder again.

"You sound totally insincere!"

"Well…for someone like me, it sounds like a regular story of high school kids being high school kids. Maybe a little crazier than when I was a student, but still…”

"Geez..."

"So? It was five girls and five guys. Did you get a boyfriend out of that trip as well?"

"That's a secret."

"Che...how boring. At least tell me the whole story."

Sayaka looked at me, her eyes wide and clear, as though she was trying to peer into my soul.

"Yamada-san, didn't you feel anything when I told you that?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

There was a sense of disappointment in her eyes.

"Mm, it's nothing."

"O-Okay."

I didn't understand what she was trying to say. I suppose there are some things I will never understand about a JK.

For a while, neither of us said anything. The rain continued to fall. Will it keep raining like this tomorrow? Hopefully it would. Rain always caused the temperature to go down and mosquitoes to stay put.

The rain slowed down to a drizzle.

"Let's go back to sleep," I said.

"Mh, sure."

We went back inside and soon we fell asleep.

The next day, the rain came back in full force. A stratus layer of clouds hung in the sky, blocking off any sunshine. It was a grey, murky day, the kind that made the commute to work even more depressing than it already was.

Luckily, I didn't have to go to work to make a living so that I could buy food.

Without electricity, the food in the rich guy's freezer spoiled and we've been eating canned food, cup ramen and energy bars ever since.

I sat against the wall, reading a book. Sayaka lay down on the sofa, holding a book in the air. Her pose caused her skirt to ride up her legs, exposing her thighs.

Why didn't she change into indoor clothes? For some reason, she's only been wearing her uniform lately.

Naturally, my eyes were drawn to her thighs.

She looked at me, and we made eye contact.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's nothing."

I wanted to tell her that she was letting her guard down too much. But saying something like that would just cause unnecessary tension.

"Yamada-san."

"What is it?"

She put her book aside and sat up.

"Have you ever noticed," she said and crossed her legs, "that time passes by more slowly on grey, rainy days?"

"Does it?"

She nodded.

“Pitter-patter, pitter-patter…it’s like the raindrops weigh down every passing second, causing each moment to last longer."

“I think it’s just your boredom, you soshage addicted JK.”

“Hee…”

Come to think of it, the hours at the office did drag on when it was a grey and rainy day. It always felt like there was nothing to look forward to after work, even though I never planned to do anything fun and was too tired to do something anyway.

"But time doesn't matter anymore anyway," I said. "We have all the time in the world. No deadlines, no exams, no meetings. It doesn't even matter when we get out of bed."

"You make it sound like we're a bunch of NEETs."

Outside, the raindrops drummed along, ceaseless, never-ending. I imagined each drop of rain latching onto the second hand of a clock, forcing it to slow down as it traveled up to the top of the dial.

"Rain always makes my body feel lethargic," I said. "It's like I'm so bored that I don't even want to move anymore."

"You sound like an old man," Sayaka said.

"Maybe I am an old man."

"You're not that old. I mean if I look at you closely, you look quite young for an adult. With a bit of makeup and a haircut, you could even pass for a university student…maybe even a high schooler. *Nee*, senpai?"

"Is that a compliment?"

"Maybe." She cackled with laughter.

Tick-tock…tick-tock…

The clock in my apartment continued on, unperturbed by the rain and the flow of time. And it might have been just my imagination, but the second hand did appear to move a little slower than usual.

[Summer]

Chapter 10

The next day, the rain cleared, and the blue sky returned. The sun appeared and soon a sweltering humid heat invaded every corner of Tokyo, and no fan in the apartment was able to hold it back. It crept through the windows and the door, demanding to be acknowledged by the only two living human beings in Tokyo.

The air was wet and our clothes stuck to our skin. I couldn't tell if it was because of the humidity or because I was constantly sweating.

Sayaka and I were lying on the tatami mats, staring at the ceiling and dreaming of a time when we still had electricity. It felt like it was ages ago, even though it's only been a few days since the power grid broke down.

"I would kill for an ice cold beer," I said.

"I want that icy drink they have at Starbucks."

"Heee, high schoolers go to Starbucks too?"

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"I always thought that high schoolers hang out at karaoke parlors and arcades."

"Arcades are from your generation, Yamada-san. These days we go to Starbucks and play games on our phones…or at least we used to do that."

"How times have changed… Back in those days, we'd go to the arcade just to enjoy the air conditioner."

"You make air conditioning sound like a luxury. Were you born in the Meiji era?"

"I'm not that old, you troublesome JK."

"Heh…heh…"

Even Sayaka's laughter sounded lethargic, depressed by the heat.

"And it's not like we always went to the arcade. We'd play Pokemon on our GameBoys after school."

"Heee, I've only ever played Pokemon on my phone."

"I played Pokemon Silver and Gold back then."

"Oh! Those two games are pretty new."

"Huh? Those two games aren't new at all… They are ancient."

"You mean Heart Gold and Soul Silver, right?"

"Oh God, please stop, you're making me feel like an old man."

"Huh? Now what?"

"Those two are remakes of the original games that came out twenty years ago."

"Twenty — !"

"The original games are older than you, haha…" I chuckled.

"Hearing you say that somehow makes me want to punch you."

"Go ahead."

She slowly raised a fist into the air, pointed it at the ceiling, and then dropped her hand like a rock.

“I really want a cold beer,” I said.

“You said that just now.”

I closed my eyes and thought of the ice cold draft beer I’d drink after work. I was a regular and the izakaya owner would serve me my drink before I even ordered anything.

“Yamada-san! I haven’t seen you in a while!”

“Work is busy — ah, thanks.”

“We got a shipment of fresh mackerel. You want to try it?”

“Sure, give me some chicken skewers too.”

“Got it.”

Thinking back, those moments were one of the few bright points of being a white collar worker. The izakaya was a refuge where the weary salaryman could find a moment of salvation.

“*Nee,* Yamada-san.”

I felt a hand touch my arm gently.

“Yeah?”

“We need to do something about this heat.”

“I told you before, I can’t repair the power grid. And even if I knew how to do it, it takes more than two people to repair big infrastructure.”

“No…I wasn’t talking about that.”

“Hmm?"

Sayaka took a sharp breath. She clapped her hands together and sat up. She shot up in the air like a rocket and landed on her feet.

"Yamada-san! Let's ride your bike!"

"Why? Is there something you want to get?"

“No! It's just too hot."

“What…I don’t get it.”

“Come on! Move it! Please! The wind will feel great once we go at higher speeds.”

“Hmmm, sure, let’s try that.”

I struggled to my feet, and we left the apartment. We got onto my bike and rode without any destination in mind, letting the wind cool us down.

"This feels so good," Sayaka groaned.

“You’re right. It feels like a waste of fuel though.”

"We have all the fuel in Japan at our disposal."

“That’s true, and we don’t have to pay for it either.”

The air was soaked with the scent of rain. We drove across puddles and our feet got wet, but neither of us cared. The sun caused the wet streets to sparkle like the sea. The rush of the wind felt like a blessing.

I took a deep breath. My body was light and I felt young again, like I had just finished school for the day and waited for the rain to let up, and now I was on my way home with a precious kohai riding behind me.

We'd say stuff like, "Argh, the rain is so annoying. Now I won't be able to catch the new episode on TV."

"Senpai, you still watch stuff like that?"

"Shut up, it's a great show."

"Heee, you act so mature at school, but you're still a boy at heart."

"Stop teasing me. Show your senpai some respect."

"Heh-heh~ Let's go to your place. Help me finish my homework."

"No way. I'm going to drop you off at home."

"You're so mean."

A smile spread across my lips. How nostalgic.

"Eh?"

Sayaka put her arms around my waist. Her chest pressed against my back.

"Sayaka?"

"My stomach feels a little cold, so just let me stay like this for a bit."

"Your stomach is cold? Does it hurt?"

"You shouldn't make a girl say this kind of thing twice…idiot."

"Oh, sorry."

Were girls sensitive about their stomachs? She wasn't modest like this when we lounged at home. Or maybe she was like this because we were outside?

Even though I've been in relationships before, I still had a hard time understanding how the opposite sex thought.

"I'm all sweaty. I might smell a bit."

"…I don't mind."

I gulped. Something about those words made my heart jump for just a moment.

Get a grip already. What kind of man would I be if I let myself be affected by a JK like this.

After a while, we made a turn and headed towards the city. Since we had already gone through the trouble of coming out, we decided to visit Kinokuniya again. As we rode into the city, the scent of a storm that had just passed mixed together with a foul stench. At first, it was possible to ignore this smell, but the further we rode into the city, the denser the buildings became, the stronger the smell was.

Eventually we stopped before we even reached the bookstore.

"What is this smell?" Sayaka asked. "It makes me want to throw up."

I knew the answer to her question, but at the same time, I was afraid of saying it. The failure of the power grid signaled the beginning of the end of the dream we've been living, and this was the final nail in the coffin.

"I think it is the smell of decomposing bodies."

"W-What?"

"Last year, during early summer, the Tokyo government told everyone to stay at home. Some people fled the city, but most people listened and stayed at home. After the virus mutated again, even people who stayed at home got

infected with it because it could go through air conditioning units. This resulted in most people dying alone at home, effectively turning every apartment building into a tower of graves."

"B-But why was there no smell until now?"

"People began to die alone in large numbers during the summer, but cold weather quickly came, and because dead people can't turn on the heating, the bodies froze during the autumn and winter, stopping the decomposition process."

I looked at all the buildings around us. Up until now, I was able to ignore the grim reality that surrounded us, but summer had arrived and the true hell came with it.

"The recent heat combined with the humid air from the rain yesterday must've caused the bodies to thaw and accelerate the decomposition process."

"That kind of thing…"

The color drained from her face. I hadn't even told her about the worst things I saw. When I first broke into the rich guy's house to search for food, I saw a cat eating the owner's body. It had nestled itself into the man's stomach and nibbled away at the guts.

In the end, I chased the cat away and gave the man a proper burial, even though I never knew him when he was alive. Why did I do that? I wasn't sure either. It felt like the decent thing to do. Although I wasn't able to eat for three days after that.

"Come on, let's go."

I grabbed Sayaka's hand and pulled her towards the bike. She nodded and got on.

This time, our trip to Kinokuniya wasn't fun. We were on a mission. Without saying anything to each other, we knew that our time Tokyo was up and we had to start preparing for the inevitable. If we didn't prepare, we'd go back to being hunter-gatherers.

We collected books on camping, survival techniques, hunting, and fishing. We also found some cookbooks and even a guide on how to build your own farm.

"I wonder why Kinokuniya sells books on how to become a farmer," Sayaka said. "I mean, who would read something like that?"

"There was that trend among white collar workers where they quit their jobs and went to live in the countryside, returning to the fields, as they called it. A lot of people must've liked the idea, and they bought books like this to help them prepare, but very few actually did it in the end."

"Did you think about returning to the countryside?"

"Hmm…sometimes," I admitted, "I daydreamed about doing that, but I also knew I'd never be able to do it. White collar workers are usually stuck at their jobs, both mentally and physically, and deep down inside, we know that we will be unable to make a living in the countryside. All of our skills are useless without a computer and a desk."

I decided not to tell her about the farm girl fantasy I and many other disillusioned male white collar workers harbored together with the idea of living in the countryside. We dreamed about going to the countryside, working on a farm and coming across a wholesome farm girl, whose smile was as bright as the sun and her heart as pure as the snow. We'd work together, fall in love, have children and grow older together.

"We can't live on canned food and cup noodles forever, so we'll have to take up farming eventually."

"Yeah."

We took all the books we needed and then headed home. On our way back, we both took shallow breaths.

That night, we lay in the apartment, surrounded by fans. Both of us had kicked the blankets away and tossed and turned, unable to fall asleep. It wasn't just the heat that made things unbearable; the smell from the city and our neighbors made breathing difficult.

Eventually we both gave up on sleeping.

"I feel sick," she said.

"Me too."

I wanted to throw up, but food was running out and I didn't want to waste anything.

She leaned forward, and I felt her forehead resting against my arm.

"Yamada-san…let's leave…I can't take it anymore."

I nodded. "Let's leave at first light."

In the darkness, aided only by the moonlight, we got up and spent the whole night packing the things we needed to bring with us.

We each picked one book we wanted to keep and left the rest behind. Wherever we went, the reasoning went, we could just break into a new bookstore and get new books. Instead, we filled several suitcases with clothes, water, food, and the survival books that we took from Kinokuniya earlier today.

We didn't have time to study those yet, but once we left Tokyo, this knowledge would become invaluable.

At first light, we went out and found a Toyota Land Cruiser with an open rear. Fortunately the door was unlocked, and the owner had left the ignition key behind.

We began to load up our luggage. Naturally, I would be driving since an adult couldn't let a JK sit behind the wheel.

"I didn't know you could drive," Sayaka commented.

"I got a driver's license in university because I thought it would make me more employable," I said. "But after I started working, I never got the chance to drive a car."

I didn't add that it was difficult to get a date without a car since many women considered it insulting if the guy expects her to take the train during

a date. A lot of guys hated this attitude, but at the same time, I could understand their reasoning. No woman would want to go to a love hotel with a man while riding the train. It would hurt their pride.

I suppose both men and women in Japan will always have a part of themselves stuck in the bubble era. Everyone is dead now anyway, so I suppose this didn't matter anymore.

"If you can drive a car, then why were you riding a Cub the whole time?"

"The Cub reminds me of the times when I visited my cousins in the countryside. They'd let me ride their bike when I was there. I really wanted to get something like this, but it doesn't make sense in Tokyo, so I never bought one."

"It reminds you of a time when you were young, huh…"

I could sense what she was going to say, so I decided to say it for her.

"Like an uncle who listens to old CDs instead of streaming music because it reminds him of his youth."

"I was going to say that! How did you know?"

"I can see it on your face, you troublesome JK. What else? Visiting old-timey candy stores where you buy stuff from an old lady whom you call granny even though she isn't your grandmother? And playing those trading card games at the playground. Ah, and let's not forget about those Tamagotchi things."

Sayaka's shoulders shook with laughter.

"Yamada-san, you're too funny. But Tamagotchis are pretty new."

"The original ones were released in the 90s. Everyone back then played with one of those things."

"Heee, I didn't know that."

We loaded up the remainder of our stuff and then got into the car.

"So, where do you want to go?" I asked.

"Hmm…I don't know. Let's just get out of the city. Do you have any ideas?"

"We should go south, towards Kansai, maybe even Kyushu if we can make it that far."

"Whaaaaat? But it's even hotter down there than in Tokyo."

"That's exactly why I want to go there. It's summer now, but it will be winter in half a year. Without electricity and heating, it will be hard for us to survive the winter with just a bunsen burner and some blankets. We need to go somewhere warmer before it gets too cold."

Sayaka blinked. "I hadn't thought of that." Suddenly, she looked ashamed of herself.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It's nothing…I just…I just thought that it would be nice to see the snow in Hokkaido, but now that you say it like that, we'd definitely freeze to death, huh?"

"We can head to Hokkaido sometime next year, maybe in the spring. I hear that Hokkaido has beautiful flower fields in the summer."

“Next year…mhh, sure.”

Next year…

I said those words with the assumption that we would keep traveling together, that only the seasons would change but we would stick together.

Where will we be in a year from now?

There is no guarantee that she and I would stay together. In the first place, it is weird for a salaryman and JK to be together like this. We aren’t lovers nor are we what you could call friends — at least not in the traditional sense. We are two members of society who should have never met.

…well, whatever. It’s no use thinking about it now. Someday we will have to separate. When that day comes, I will do my best to say goodbye properly. Until then, we have to keep living and facing each new sunrise.

“In that case, we should go to Niigata first,” Sayaka said.

“Why?”

“You remember the uncle I mentioned before? The one who works in the police force and gave me the gun? He also thought that the world would end soon and he prepared a lot of things for it. I’m not completely sure, but I think he mentioned something about buying a diesel generator and storing it in his shed."

“Are you sure?”

“I think so…at that time I didn’t care, so I wasn’t really listening, but I’m pretty sure he mentioned something about a diesel generator…”

“Hmm…”

I pulled out a map of the Kanto region and nearby areas. I spread it over the dashboard and it spilled over to Sayaka’s seat. She took the other side of the map and helped me smoothen it out.

“Niigata is north of Tokyo. Normally we could just take the Shinkansen there…”

“With the Joetsu Shinkansen it takes about two and a half hours,” Sayaka added.

“Oh, you’ve taken it before?”

“Yeah, several times. One time my friends and I skipped a school trip and went to Disneyland instead.”

“Wow, I would’ve never had the guts to do that.”

Sayaka grinned and made the peace sign.

“Let’s see… We can drive on the E17 highway to Gunma and then all the way to Niigata. It’s actually not that far.”

“How long will it take?”

“About four hours, I think.”

“In that case, we can collect the diesel generator tonight and then leave Niigata tomorrow.”

“…sure.”

I glanced at her. She was looking out of the car window, her face not displaying any particular emotion. I found it odd that she would be in such a

hurry to leave Niigata. It was as if she didn't want to spend even one night there. Was it because she was kicked out by the locals due to her Tokyo accent and therefore had bitter memories tied to that place? That might be it, but something felt odd.

My gut feeling told me that it might be something else, something she hasn't told me about.

"Sayaka…"

"Hmm?"

She looked at me and tilted her head slightly.

"…it's nothing."

Whatever was troubling her, it was better not to push her to think about it too much. If she didn't want to tell me, then I'd just wait until she wanted to talk about it.

I turned the ignition key and the engine rumbled to life. After a bit of practice, I recalled the things I learned at driving school and managed to drive down the road without steering into a wall.

"Whoa! You almost killed us!"

"Do you even know how to drive?"

"Shouldn't you just let me take the wheel?"

Sayaka's commentary wasn't very encouraging. But I refused to let her drive — it would hurt my pride as a man to have a JK drive me around.

After getting lost for a while because we weren't very good at using paper maps since we were used to getting turn-by-turn directions on our smartphones, we finally found the ramp that led to the E17 highway.

There was one big problem though.

"Whoa!" Sayaka mouthed.

"What the hell…"

We drove up to the overpass and saw a sea of cars stretching as far as the eye could see. Every lane was full. All the cars stood in an orderly row; an eerie silence hung in the air. It was odd to see so many vehicles all jam packed together. Not a single person was around.

"What happened here?" Sayaka asked.

We got out of the car. The sickening smell of decaying bodies hung in the air. We both put on a mask to filter the smell, but it didn't help much.

"Some people tried to flee the city before the lockdown," I said. "I'm guessing some decided to go by car, and they weren't the only ones who thought of that."

"Do you think the government blocked the highway up ahead?"

I nodded. "Either that or there must've been an accident — look." I pointed at the cars. "A lot of them have their doors open. They must've decided that it is better to walk."

We walked towards one of the empty cars and saw a decaying body in the backseat. It was a baby; it must've been left behind when the parents fled.

Sayaka fell to her knees and vomited. I gritted my teeth and suppressed the need to puke with all my might.

I helped her get up and handed her a bottle of water so that she could rinse her mouth. Afterwards we went back to the car and shut the door. Neither of us said anything for a moment.

"W-Why?" she asked.

I took a deep breath. I had seen several dead bodies before meeting Sayaka, but this was my first time seeing an abandoned baby. It was like someone had punched me in the stomach.

"There must've been chaos up here on the highway…maybe the parents were arrested? Or they just ran away? I don't know…"

"But they abandoned their baby — !"

I gritted my teeth. I glanced at the ground. There were some dark spots on the asphalt. Was that oil…or perhaps dried blood?

What the hell happened up here?

"What is so important about this bridge that parents would abandoned their newborn child?" Sayaka asked, her voice shaking.

"Maybe…wait…" I mumbled and took out the map again. "Look, Niigata is a port town, not as large or famous as Tokyo Harbor, but one of my former colleagues told me that ferries to Taiwan and South Korea regularly

dock there. There is also a place called Sado Island just off the coast. Maybe people were hoping to flee via Niigata."

"But the virus was spreading all over the world…what use would that do?"

"They must've been desperate to get away from Tokyo."

I set the car in reverse and we backed up. With the highway jammed, we had no choice but to find an alternate route out of the city. We drove underneath the highway bridge and continued to go north on regular roads until we left the city behind and the landscape turned rural. Overgrown rice paddies, scattered houses, and green hills everywhere. It was amazing how quickly the landscape could change.

We drove along the countryside roads, but our maps weren't detailed enough; our maps focused on the highways, and we didn't have any local area maps for the smaller regular roads. And even if we did, neither of us was good at reading maps.

"I wish we could use Yahoo Maps," I sighed. "I think we're going in the right direction, but it'd be nice to confirm that. I'd hate to end up in Nagoya."

Sayaka pulled a compass out of her schoolbag. "I used this when I traveled to Tokyo. We just have to go north, right?"

I raised an eyebrow. "A compass…huh, actually that is pretty useful, especially since we can't use the GPS on our smartphones."

Sayaka didn't respond. Her face was still quite pale. Was the dead baby still on her mind?

"Are you alright…Sayaka?"

Saying her name without any honorifics still felt strange for me. For the most part, I've just said 'hey' or 'you' whenever I talked to her. But seeing her like this made me want to use her name.

"Huhn?" Sayaka blinked. She seemed surprised to hear this.

"You told me to use your first name, remember?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Are you alright?" I repeated.

She nodded slightly. "I'm okay."

She said those words, but I could tell that she was lying. The sight of the dead baby must've shaken her to the core. I was just grateful that we found no wild animals gnawing on that baby's body. Such a sight would've destroyed both of us.

We got lost a few times and took several detours because sometimes the roads were blocked by abandoned cars. At one intersection, we even found empty shotgun shells scattered on the ground.

It was easy to imagine what happened here. After finding the highway jammed and blocked, Tokyoites drove out of the city using the countryside

roads and came across the locals. The locals were afraid of the virus and eventually resorted to using force to stop them.

Gun ownership was rare in Japan. I read on net blogs that countryside folk sometimes get gun ownership licenses for hunting purposes, and in rare cases, gangs sell smuggled guns from China or North Korea. Japan had a super low crime rate, so guns were rarely ever even seen out in the open, let alone used. Someone out there must've been prepared. Or maybe it was the yakuza groups with access to firearms that decided to take over some land in the countryside and the locals put up a fierce fight.

"There probably was a major battle between Tokoyites and the locals," I said while we gingerly drove through the mini battlefield. And then I saw something that made my stomach churn. "Sayaka, close your eyes!"

"Huhn?"

"Close your eyes now!"

Bewildered by my sudden demand, she shut her eyes tightly.

"Yamada-san, what's wrong?"

Her hand touched my arm.

"There's something horrible outside. It's better for you not to see it."

"W-Worse than the baby?"

"I don't know, but it's pretty bad."

"O-Okay."

I'll never be able to forget what I just saw. One moment I was looking at green grass and rice paddies, then the next moment I saw a headless body on ground with a large hole in its stomach, its guts all over the place. Even from a slight distance I could see the maggots and rats moving inside the meaty mess. The corpse hadn't completely decomposed yet, the person might've died in late autumn or early winter.

After we passed, I stopped next to a rural bus shelter, the kind with a metal roof and wooden bench, and sat down. I immediately took out my Lucky Stars and lit a cigarette.

"Are you okay?" Sayaka asked.

"Y-Yeah, I just need a moment."

I inhaled deeply and exhaled. The nicotine cleared my mind.

Once I finished the first cigarette, I lit a second one and then a third. I was about to smoke a fourth one when Sayaka snatched my pack away.

"Enough," she said. "You're going to smoke yourself to death like this."

"Oh…s-sorry."

She sat down next to me. Like always, she wore her school uniform. Sitting at the bus stop like this, she must've looked like a typical student who was on her way to school.

"What did you see back there?" she asked.

"Do you really want to know?"

She nodded and peered at me with an earnest look in her eyes. "I don't want to see you suffer alone like this."

Those words moved my heart — just a little bit.

“A man…a dead man with his head blown off and a hole in his stomach. His guts were everywhere and I could see rats and maggots inside…”

Sayaka breathed slowly.

“I see.”

“I think there might’ve been a big battle. Although the Tokyoites wouldn’t stand a chance since city folk are better with a computer than they are with guns.”

She handed me my Lucky Stars back.

I put away the pack. Suddenly I noticed the sound of flowing water coming from behind the bus shelter.

“I’m going to go wash my face.” I went behind the bus shelter, kneeled down on the grass, and washed my face. The cool river water was refreshing and tasted better than the stuff in the plastic bottles from convenience stores.

Sayaka appeared next to me with some empty bottles. Without saying a word, she refilled them.

A little while later, we were back on the road.

By the time we arrived in Niigata, it was already dark. A four hour drive turned into a ten hour ordeal. Every time we saw a blocked road, we had to turn around and find a different route.

Sayaka suggested that we find a hardware store and install some extra LED lights on the car roof. Otherwise, the existing headlights on our Land Cruiser weren’t enough to drive in the absolute darkness of a world without electricity. I agreed with her.

Just like Tokyo, Niigata was completely abandoned. However, it was a full moon, which made the streets a little easier to navigate. The silver light also caused the cicadas to sing together with the crickets. At least it wasn’t eerily silent like Tokyo.

“It’s too dark now. Let’s get the diesel generator tomorrow morning,” I said. “Can we stay at your old home for the night?”

Sayaka shook her head.

“The locals burned down my parents’ house when they chased me away.”

“I see…”

There was a bitter edge in her voice when she said that.

We passed by several houses, but no one tried to stop us. The fact that no one came out when we drove past meant that every resident in this city was dead.

Just when I was about to suggest that we sleep in the car, I noticed a source of artificial light glowing over the roofs of some of the residential buildings.

“What is that light?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“The street lights aren’t on, but a part of the power grid in Niigata must still be working. Maybe there are even survivors!”

My heartbeat jumped. Survivors in Niigata! Maybe there was hope after all. Did the JSDF abandon Tokyo and set up a perimeter in Niigata? Maybe United Nations troops set up a base here.

I put my foot on the gas and drove towards the light. Soon we arrived at the source.

“Huh?”

[Summer]

Chapter 11

The building with its lights on was the local high school. As soon as we stopped the car in front of the school gates, some figures stepped out of the building and came towards us. They pointed flashlights at us, and I had to shield my eyes.

“Hello? Who are you?” one of them asked. Based on the voice, it was a man, a boy rather. His voice carried a youthful tone.

I rolled down the window and said, “Good evening, we’re survivors. We just arrived in Niigata.”

The boy turned off his flashlight, and I could see his face for the first time. He was handsome. His features were well arranged, kind of like one of those TV drama stars, and his hair was neatly cut. Unlike most boys his age, he had an air of maturity about him. I knew his kind. He probably was a student council president or some kind of club leader.

The boy peered inside the car and there was recognition on his face.

“Sayaka?” he exclaimed.

Sayaka averted her eyes and gripped the hem of her skirt.

“Satoshi-kun,” she said.

A smile spread across his face. “Sayaka! You’re alive! Hey everyone! Sayaka is alive! Open the gate!”

A group of roughly twenty students streamed out of the building and surrounded the car.

“Sayaka! Oh my God!”

“We were worried about you!”

“Who is this old man next to you?”

The entire time, Sayaka said nothing. She looked down at her feet and avoided eye contact.

“Hey guys, give them some space,” Satoshi said. “Mister, you can park your car in front of the building.”

“…sure.”

He sure was comfortable giving orders to adults. He spoke to me casually, even though it was our first time meeting, as if I was his age or he was my boss.

The students immediately backed away from the car as soon as he suggested it. There was no doubt about it; this guy was the leader.

Once I parked the car, I turned off the engine and we got out. The leader took Sayaka’s hand and led her into the school building. He did that like it was the most natural thing to do. She glanced back at me, but in the darkness, I couldn’t clearly see her expression.

I followed them into the building. As far as I could tell, there were no teachers present. Did only these kids survive the pandemic? If so, then it meant that I was the only adult here.

The boys and girls made camp in two separate classrooms. They had spread futons out on the floor to sleep on and used a third classroom as a shared common room area. We sat down in that third classroom, and he told us about what was going on.

The leader introduced himself. His name was Satoshi, and he was indeed the student council president when there was still an education system.

“As far as we know, we are the only survivors in Niigata,” he said. “After the disease spread from Tokyo to Niigata, chaos broke out and all of our parents died. Us students gathered here and decided that we have to survive together. I think we might be immune to the virus since it has infected and killed everyone else. What about you, mister?”

He sat next to Sayaka, their shoulders almost touching. It was almost unnatural how little space there was between them. None of the other students seemed to this odd though.

This was just my guess, but could it be that he was her boyfriend?

Sayaka didn’t move away, but her expression was strained. Was she uncomfortable with this situation or did she just feel tired from the journey? If she felt uncomfortable, why didn’t she just move away? Maybe the air didn’t allow her to do so.

“I’m the only survivor from Tokyo, and like you said, maybe us survivors are immune.”

Satoshi kept his friendly expression, but his next question carried a subtle edge.

“How did you meet Sayaka? If I may ask — what is your relationship?”

Heh, what a confident brat. I could imagine this kind of guy climbing to the top of whatever company hired him. Too bad the world was gone and his bright future with it.

“I met Sayaka in the spring when she was looking for food in Tokyo, and we have been sticking together since then.”

“Thank you for taking care of our Sayaka.”

Satoshi smiled kindly, but his gaze lingered on me like he was suspicious of me for some reason.

“It’s nothing.”

“Why did you leave Tokyo?” he asked.

“The weather became too hot and the smell of corpses was too much for us to take. So we decided to leave.”

“I see. The virus struck Tokyo quite badly. Well, I suppose it makes sense since it was imported into Japan via Narita airport.”

I decided not to contradict him. Having an argument about the differences between facts and rumors would just make the atmosphere awkward.

“I assume you plan to continue to travel?” he asked.

He looked at me and I looked at him. Heh…what a brat.

“That’s right.”

“Well, thank you for everything. Please feel free to stay the night.”

“Sure.”

His voice and words sounded kind, but there was a clear implied meaning behind that handsome face.

Thank you for taking care of our Sayaka.

Our Sayaka. He used the possessive determiner. In other words: Sayaka is part of our group.

He expected Sayaka to stay in Niigata. Which made sense since they were her classmates.

Please feel free to stay the night.

I was welcome to stay, but I shouldn’t overstay my welcome. He wanted me gone by tomorrow morning.

I looked at Sayaka. She hadn’t said a word the entire time.

“I’m sure you have a lot to catch up on,” I said. “I’ll go out and have a smoke.”

I got up and left the classroom.

[Sayaka]

I never wanted to see them again. Their faces, their voices — I wanted to forget about all of it. They are the reason why I left Niigata and ran to Tokyo. Why are they smiling and welcoming me like this? It was as if they forgot about everything that had happened before.

When the locals turned against me, even Satoshi-kun, my boyfriend, wouldn’t let me into his house. I had knocked on his door and begged, but he refused to let me in.

“It’s not convenient right now,” he said at that time. “I’m sorry…please don’t force me…I need to keep my parents safe.”

I went to all of my classmates and even those who were from different classes, but none of them would give me shelter. I left Niigata with only my school uniform.

That cold sensation of where Satoshi-kun touched my hand still lingered. All of these fake smiles surrounding me made me sick. I wanted to scream at them and tell them that I’m disappointed they weren’t all dead.

Yamada-san got up. “I’m sure you have a lot to catch up on. I’ll go out and have a smoke.”

Don’t leave me alone with them!

I wanted to say those words, but my throat was dry.

As soon as Yamada-san left the classroom, Satoshi-kun said, “Whoa, isn’t it weird to be traveling with an old man like that?”

My other classmates also spoke up.

“He didn’t do anything to you, did he, Sayaka?”

“I heard that men in Tokyo lust after young flesh, especially JKs.”

“Did you sleep in the same room as him since spring?”

“It’s a good thing you’re back with us.”

This was too much. I couldn’t let them insult Yamada-san like this.

“He never did anything to me. He…he was a perfect gentleman.”

“Heee, are you sure?”

“I bet he’s the type that secretly ogles JKs LOL”

“I wonder how long he is going to stay here.”

Satoshi-kun cleared his voice. “Let’s not needlessly insult his character, he did bring Sayaka-chan back to us after all.”

“You’re right.”

“Sorry…but I just find people like him weird.”

“He totally looks like a normal salaryman.”

Satoshi-kun must’ve given some kind of silent signal because suddenly everyone began to make excuses to leave the classroom. Just a few moments later, it was just me and him left.

“Sayaka-chan,” he said and put his arm around my shoulder.

His face was just inches away from mine. I sensed that he wanted to kiss me.

Did he seriously think that we are still a couple? We never broke up properly, but did he really think that I’m still his girlfriend?

“I’m so sorry that I couldn’t help you last year. I’m the worst. At that time, everything was so chaotic and I just didn’t know what to do. After you left Niigata, my parents died and every day I regretted not helping you.”

He spoke those words in a quiet whisper. It was the kind of voice most girls would fall for.

Did he really think that this would work on me? I gritted my teeth. This narcissistic bastard. He really thinks that these kinds of sweet words are enough. He has no idea what I had to do to survive the winter.

“I was so worried about you, Sayaka-chan. After everyone died, I looked everywhere for you, but your house got burned down, and I couldn’t find you anywhere. I tried calling you, but the 5G network went down and no messages could get through. I never thought that you’d make it all the way to Tokyo. You’re amazing.”

His hand slid down to my waist and slipped underneath my shirt, touching my skin.

Oh, he is using this move again. I’ve heard from other girls that he likes to do this to set the mood.

He grabbed my chin and forced me to look at him. He kissed me. His lips were warm, his tongue felt hot, his scent just like I remembered it.

This is wrong.

“Hnghh!” I pushed him away, but his grip tightened; he wouldn’t let go. I slapped him hard, and his grip loosened.

He looked at me, his face filled with bewilderment.

“Sayaka-chan? What’s wrong?”

“You…you can’t — “ I breathed hard. “You abandoned me when I needed you the most. You left me to die. Those old men in Niigata tried to take

advantage of me, but you never tried to help. You just locked yourself in your room and never even considered helping."

"You misunderstand. I had to protect my parents — "

"You really thought that I could infect them just because I speak with a Tokyo accent? You're the worst," I spat at him.

Satoshi-kun grimaced. He looked down at the floor with shame.

"You're right, I'm sorry," he said. "I'm really sorry."

"It's alright, we're not dating anymore anyway."

He looked up. He grabbed both of my shoulders. "Don't say that, Sayaka-chan! Please don't say such hurtful words. The feelings between us are so precious. Sayaka-chan…I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say. I am so sorry."

"It's fine."

I turned my shoulder to him.

"Don't you realize the situation we are in? There is no one left besides us. We can't depend on adults anymore. We have to stick together to survive. Please don't say things like that."

"I've survived fine on my own, and I'm with Yamada-san."

"You mean that old man?"

"Mh-hm."

He looked at me with bewilderment.

"You can't be serious."

"Why is that so hard to believe?"

"What did he do to you, Sayaka? Did he touch you? I knew it! These Tokyo men…they all lust after teenage girl. I'll kill him if you tell me to. It's alright. You're safe now. I will keep you safe."

I blinked. Satoshi-kun had changed. Before the world ended, he was the charismatic leader everyone in our year group looked up to. Even some of the senpais respected him. It's only natural for him to end up leading those who survived, but the way he spoke had changed. With no teachers and other adults to keep him in check, he has used his charisma to develop into a leader no one will question — and he has gotten used to that kind of authority. Now there was delusion in his eyes. Someone who only believes their own reasoning. He believes that he is absolutely right.

"What do you want, Satoshi-kun?"

His grip on my shoulders increased. It hurt.

"I want to go back to the way things were before. Remember those days before the world went to hell? We can go back to those times. This school will be our home. I love you, Sayaka-chan. I can protect you. We can go back to the way things were before. Together with everyone, we will survive."

…

I nodded. "That sounds wonderful. I'm sorry for slapping you like that… I was just surprised when you kissed me like that."

"Sayaka-chan…"

“I’d prefer it if Yamada-san didn’t sleep with us in the same building. Can you ask him to sleep in the car? That way, when he wakes up, he can just drive off.”

“Sure, I will do that.”

[Summer]

Chapter 12

“Yamada-san, we don’t have two extra futons. We only have one more futon, and we decided to give it to Sayaka-chan. I’m really sorry.”

Satoshi bowed as he apologized. We stood on the rooftop. I just finished my second cigarette when he came to talk to me.

Hmph, this kid has perfect manners. It’s difficult to object to whatever he is saying as long as he kept up that perfect behavior. No wonder he was the leader. Even if someone challenged his authority, he’d have the skill and looks to win popular support. I couldn’t figure out if his perfect manners were an act or if he simply had good parents; I suppose that is frightening in and of itself.

“Oh, that’s not a problem, I’ll just sleep in the car.”

“Thank you so much for your corporation.”

His message was clear. You are not welcome in the school building. He wanted to keep Sayaka, and he wanted me gone as soon as possible. He was probably hoping that I’d drive away at first light.

“By the way,” I said. “Sayaka seemed pretty upset with the people of Niigata when I first met her.”

“Hmm, a lot of things happened.”

“What’s your relationship with Sayaka?”

He looked at me with a smile. “I’m her boyfriend.”

“I see.”

“Yamada-san, I’m very sorry, but I can’t help but feel a little uneasy. It’s just so odd to see a salaryman together with a JK. I hear a lot of scary stories about adults and JKs in Tokyo… I’m terribly sorry for being rude, but what exactly is your real relationship with Sayaka-chan?”

Ah, so he wants to know if I have slept with his girlfriend. It probably bothered him to see Sayaka arrive in a car driven by another man, as if she was my woman or something along those lines. I guess I should calm him down by telling him the truth since there’d be no point in telling a lie and agitating him, even though seeing his type of guy makes me want to see him lose his composure.

“We’re just traveling companions,” I said. "She needed water, food and shelter when we met, and I was able to provide that for her.”

“And you asked for nothing in return.”

“That’s right.”

“I see, I see.” And then he added. “In any case, thank you so much for bringing Sayaka-chan back to us. We were really worried about her.”

Something about this kid rubs me the wrong way. He spoke as though it had already been decided that I would leave tomorrow and Sayaka would stay with them. I thought that this was the most natural way for things to go, but for him to simply assume that without question just bothered me.

“If you are her boyfriend, why did she leave Niigata and come to Tokyo? Shouldn’t you have sheltered her?”

His perfect expression froze for a short moment. Then he said, “Well, a lot of things happened, and it was really chaotic.”

He didn’t want to answer the question.

“Hmm, I see.”

At his age, even though he was more mature than the rest, he was still a boy. When things fell apart, he probably didn’t have the life experience and not the independence to take action. Based on what Sayaka told me before, her boyfriend probably abandoned her because the entire town was against her. My guess would be he wanted their relationship to go back to the way it was before.

The boy left.

I went down to the car, sat down in the driver’s seat, and listened to the sounds of nighttime insects. I leaned back and lit a cigarette. My sixth one for the day. If Sayaka knew, she would probably get mad at me. In my mind, I could her hear scolding me. *Geez, Yamada-san, you shouldn’t smoke so much!*

Satoshi’s face appeared in my mind.

I’m her boyfriend.

He was like an eager young male trying to mark his territory.

Heh-heh…

I understood how he felt. Guys feel intense jealousy at that young age. I still remember how jealous I felt in high school when I saw my girlfriend walk together with another guy. The intensity of the jealousy was all-consuming; it was the only thing I could think about for several days. I was like a bull seeing red. The male mind turns into a single-celled organism.

What should I do? So far, Sayaka hasn’t come down to talk to me. Did she want to stay here with her classmates even though she didn’t seem to like them very much?

It’d feel weird for an adult like me to knock on the classroom door and ask to talk to Sayaka alone. Satoshi probably wouldn’t allow it.

Thinking about it, it was probably better for Sayaka to be with kids her own age. When winter came, they can use their combined manpower to make a big fire and keep warm that way.

I suppose this is the end. The journey was fun while it lasted.

In the morning, I will say a brief goodbye to Sayaka and then head down to Kansai.

The thought of traveling alone made me feel a little lonely.

A knock on the car window woke me up. The first rays of sunlight peeked above the horizon. I rubbed my eyes and looked around. Who was knocking on the window?

“Yamada-san, wake up.”

“Sayaka?”

I unlocked the doors and she got into the passenger seat. She wrinkled her nose.

“It stinks in here. Did you smoke in the car?”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“Never mind that. Let’s go get the diesel generator from my uncle’s shed.”

“Uhm…wait, did you tell your classmates that you’re here?”

She shook her head. “I snuck out while they were still asleep. Let’s go. I want to get out of Niigata before they wake up.”

“I thought you are going to stay with your classmates.”

Sayaka looked at me. Suddenly fury spread across her face, and I instinctively inched back. It was the first time I felt scared of her ever since she pointed a gun at me. Her wrath basically poured out of her like an active volcano and I was trapped in a confined space with her.

“Are you an idiot?! When did I ever say I wanted to stay with them? Seeing them makes me sick!”

“But…but that Satoshi told me that he is your boyfriend.”

“Did he say that to you last night?” She clicked her tongue with annoyance. “It’s true, we did date at one point, but he left me to fend for myself when I had nowhere to go. I can’t stand looking at him. And he has the audacity to act like I’m his girlfriend. It’s totally disgusting. Just so that we are clear: he is my *ex*-boyfriend. He is dead to me. I only went along with his behavior last night because otherwise, it would be troublesome since he’s got all the surviving students under his leadership.”

Yikes, that must’ve been one rough breakup.

“And I don’t want to see the rest of them either. When the locals turned against me, all of my classmates refused to help me. My ex-boyfriend refused to let me into his house even when I told him that I had nowhere else to go. All of my classmates slammed their doors shut when I needed help the most. They all sided against me. The locals kicked me out of town, and they abandoned me. They are cowards. I wish they’d all die.”

I suddenly felt a strange sense of relief in my chest.

“Are you sure? They are still your classmates. To be honest…actually, I thought it might be better for you to stay with these guys since you are the same age and — “

“Is it a bother to have me around?” she asked. She looked hurt, her downcast gaze suddenly filled with uncertainty. And then in a whisper, she said, “You don’t want to travel with me?”

“Of course I want to travel with you. I just thought it might be annoying for you to travel with an old man like me.”

“You are not that much older than me, and besides, you look young for your age.”

Her expression was resolute.

“As long as you are sure,” I said. “Are there any friends you want to take with you? The journey might be more fun with a few more people.”

She shook her head.

“I’d rather it just be the two of us.”

She said those words in a whisper, just barely loud enough for me to hear.

My heart thumped. Her cheeks turned red. She glanced at me.

“Why are you smiling?” she asked.

“It’s nothing.” I had to quickly change the topic before she realized the effect she has on me. “So the plan is to take the diesel generator from your uncle’s shed and then drive off without saying goodbye?”

She nodded.

“Satoshi-kun has become the undisputed leader, and he has gone a little crazy. If he finds out that we’re here for the generator, he will demand that we leave it behind. He’ll say something like, ‘*we have more people here, it’s only right that we get to keep it; if you want to use it, then you should stay with us*.’”

“It’s hard to disagree with that.”

“But he and my classmates left me for dead last year. I have no obligation to help them. If they freeze during the winter, they’ll just have to endure it.”

I started the engine, and we left the school. In the absolute silence of a world without society, the sound of the engine must’ve sounded like a roar. Some of Satoshi’s people must’ve woken up, but they’d probably just figure that it was the salaryman leaving as he was meant to. It should take them a while to figure out that Sayaka was gone too.

I followed Sayaka’s directions and arrived at her uncle’s shed. We broke through the door and easily found the diesel generator in the shed, along with several boxes of canned food and a few gallons of gasoline. Afterwards we also broke into the main house next to the shed.

Based on the rotten smell inside, her uncle’s dead body must be decaying in one of the rooms. I would have suggested that we give him a proper burial, but time was running out. If Satoshi woke up early and found us, then we wouldn’t be able to escape with the generator.

The generator was super heavy, and it took a long time to get it to the car, especially since I couldn’t carry it on my own, and Sayaka didn’t have that much muscle on her.

“I was part of the track and field club, I didn’t lift weights,” she said. “All of my strength is in my legs.”

“Right, right.”

The generator was large, so it was a good thing our car has an open back and therefore plenty of space. We used some rope to secure it. Afterwards, we loaded the boxes of supplies onto the backseats.

"*Yosh*, this is all of it," I said and looked at my watch. The whole thing took us about three hours. Satoshi and the other students should've noticed by now that Sayaka had vanished.

"Let's hurry up and leave," Sayaka said.

We got into the car, but this time she sat down in the driver's seat.

"You drove all day yesterday. Let me drive today, and you can rest a little."

I was moved by her consideration.

"Do you know how to drive?"

"I'm not familiar with this model, but I've watched how you change gears, and there won't be any traffic, so it should be fine even if I brake a little late."

"Okay, sure."

I handed her the car keys, and she started the engine. But as soon as we made a turn and left the property, we found a row of students blocking the narrow residential street.

Satoshi and the other classmates had formed a human wall, preventing us from driving further.

"Sayaka-chan, what is the meaning of this?" he asked. "Why are you trying to run off with this old man? Did he seduce you? Did he touch you? You don't have to stay with him, you know? We can beat him up, and he will never bother you again."

She gave him the middle finger.

"You want to pretend that what happened a year ago never happened, but I remember all of it — every single moment. None of you tried to help me even when those old men pushed me to the ground. You just looked away. Some of you even said that I should accept it as punishment for the sins of the Tokyoites."

Her voice was shaking. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"We are no longer friends. We are no longer classmates. That bond is gone."

Satoshi looked confused, as if he couldn't comprehend the words she was saying.

"Sayaka-chan, you are confused. Please, let us help you. We can be a class again, just like before. We need to stick together. You can't trust some random office worker you met in Tokyo. We are your real friends, remember?"

I sighed. Jealousy must've completely blinded him. I almost pitied him — almost. It's clear that some local men tried to do *that* kind of thing to Sayaka and none of them tried to help. They were probably too afraid to intervene since those men were local adults and they were just students.

Maybe trying to help Sayaka now was their way of trying to get rid of their guilt. If they let Sayaka go, they will have to forever live with those feelings.

“Go to hell, Satoshi-kun. You are a total *creep*. Never come near me and Yamada-san again. I hope *all of you* freeze to death during the winter.”

Her voice dripped with bitterness.

Satoshi stared at us with disbelief. Maybe this was the first time he had his will denied like this. He probably had the best grades and was going to get into a good university with a recommendation. A boy of his caliber with that kind of handsome face could probably get any girl he wanted. He was charismatic and everyone loved him and listened to him. He had the respect and admiration of his teacher and peers. The pandemic has fast-tracked his accumulation of power while his mind was still immature.

He took a sharp breath and pointed at me.

“This old man has brainwashed Sayaka,” he said. “We are trying our best, but he has turned her against us. Everyone! We have to save Sayaka! She is our classmate!”

It was such an idiotic claim that it made me cringe, but somehow his classmates got really fired up by that little speech. They raised their fists and cheered in unison.

Some of the boys got out baseball bats.

I gulped. I was a salaryman who hadn’t gotten any exercise in a long time. Meanwhile, these boys were in their physical prime. Even if I got out of the car and ran, they’d catch up to me.

I opened the window and stuck my head out. It should be possible to reason with them. They were still kids after all.

“You guys can’t seriously believe what he just said, right? Do I look like someone who would do that? I’m just an ordinary person.”

“Don’t listen to him!” Satoshi roared. “There is no way that Sayaka would want to stick with someone like him. She is one of us! He must have drugged her.”

The whole class wholeheartedly agreed with him.

I stared at them. So this is what mob mentality looked like. They completely ignored the fact that it was Sayaka at the wheel and not me, making Satoshi’s story impossible. If Sayaka didn’t want to stick with me, then she could just not drive the car.

They surrounded the car.

“Hey, it looks like they have something in the back,” one of the boys with a baseball bat said.

“I think it might be something valuable. Maybe it’s a power generator.”

Satoshi raised his hand. “Everyone! We have to capture that car! If that is a power generator, then we will need it to get through the winter.”

The wall of students came closed in on us.

Two boys got out kitchen knives and climbed onto the back of the Land Cruiser. They cut the robes that secured the generator in place.

“I’ve cut the ropes,” one of the boys announced. “Guys, help us unload this thing!”

“Let’s help him!” one of the students said. “Give me some of the robes. We need it to tie up that old man.”

It really looked like they were going to lock me up in some way. Ugh… they are just kids, but there was nothing I could do against them, especially since the athletic high school boys are in their physical prime.

“Yamada-san, please forgive me for what I’m about to do,” Sayaka said.

“Huh? What are you — “

She stepped on the gas pedal and the car lurched forward. My neck snapped back and my head hit the headrest.

“Sayaka?!”

She drove through the circle of students, crushing those in front of her. There was a sickening crunching noise, followed by several screams.

Behind us, the power generator slid back without anything securing it, and it fell off the car, crushing an unfortunate student who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

She didn’t stop. She continued to accelerate, driving towards Satoshi.

“Hey! HEY! WAIT!” he screamed, but Sayaka didn’t slow down.

He jumped to the side at the last minute. The car rushed past him and hurtled down the street. Sayaka still didn’t slow down. She kept her foot on the pedal.

Behind us, I could hear high pitched screams that quickly faded away.

Soon we were out of town, but Sayaka kept driving at full speed.

“Slow down!” I yelled and slapped her. That seemed to snap her out of her trance. She stepped on the brakes, and we came to an abrupt stop. My body lurched forwards. If I didn’t have the seatbelt on, my head would’ve been in the windshield.

She was panting. Her forehead glistened with sweat.

“I…I think at least one of them is dead,” she said.

She rested her head against the wheel.

“Come on, let’s get some fresh air.”

We got out of the car and sat down at a rural bus stop. It was built using metal sheets, and there was a wooden bench inside. The bus sign was rusted and faded to the point that it was hard to see which bus line was supposed to stop here. It didn’t matter because like most rural areas, there was probably only one bus line and rarely anyone ever used it.

Sayaka sat down and breathed heavily.

“Did you know that person?” I asked. “I mean the one who got crushed by the car.”

She nodded slightly. “His name is Yamaguchi Kota. He’s a member of the baseball club and a lot of girls like him. Why did he stand in front of the car? He…He…why did that have to happen?”

She hugged herself. She looked so small, so vulnerable, like she was going to collapse under the weight of what she had done.

“If you hadn’t driven through them, they would’ve caught us and probably beaten me to death,” I said.

Sayaka said nothing.

“You saw it yourself. They completely obeyed Satoshi, and he wanted to keep you by his side, no matter what.”

“What a creep,” Sayaka muttered.

“He probably felt guilty about abandoning you before and wanted to make up for it.”

“What he did was unforgivable. I nearly died that winter and now he wants to make up? I hope he falls down the stairs.”

I said nothing. These intense bitter feelings…they shouldn’t be something a girl like Sayaka feels at her age. She should be living a carefree youth. But her heart had been exposed to the perverseness of human nature. Cowardice and self-righteousness. The narcissism and the need to be virtuous.

I didn’t like Satoshi, but it’s not like I didn’t understand him either. I’ve seen people like him in the office. They never really change; only their title changes when they rise up the ladder.

“Do you think they will give chase?” Sayaka asked.

“I don’t know. It depends on how obsessed Satoshi is.”

Above us, dark clouds gathered and thunder roared. Moments later, rain poured down from the sky.

The heavy drops drummed on the metal roof. This tiny bus stop, an island in the vast ocean of green countryside around us.

I glanced at Sayaka. I could hear he ragged breathing. Tears were dripping from her chin. She sobbed silently, her arms hugging her waist.

“Sayaka.”

“Hm?”

I grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the bus shelter and into the rain. In a flash, we were both soaked.

“Yamada-san?!”

“Forget about your classmates. Forget about what they did to you. Forget about how they abandoned you. That is all in the past. Focus on the future. Try your best to be happy.”

Where did I find these inelegant words? I wasn’t a word smith. I never got high grades in Japanese. Reading the classics alway made my head hurt. These clumsy words came out of my mouth without me even realizing it.

The heavy raindrops fell on my head. My face was completely wet.

Your long black hair is soaked and dripping with rainwater. You are looking at me with a sense of bewilderment and then your eyes fill with woe. Seeing you like this makes me want to put my arms around you.

Suddenly I felt alive. Like the rain was washing away all the weary feelings that had accumulated in my heart. All those days of working at the office, smiling plastic smiles, spending weekends alone — all of that was gone.

Even though the world had ended — no, because the world had ended — I felt free.

She closed the distance between us and rested her head on my chest.

“Am I allowed to be happy? When such a terrible thing has happened to the world? When I killed one of my classmates?”

I put my arms around her and pulled her close.

For a long time I said nothing. The right words wouldn’t come to me. But then —

“I don’t know if we are allowed to be happy. But as long as we are alive, we have to try our best.”

Sayaka put her arms around me and cried into my chest.

Our ordinary days together will continue. Our journey will go on.

Perhaps happiness is being able to live ordinary days.

These past couple of months filled with ordinary days felt more real than my life before the world ended. It was as if the days before the pandemic were a blurry dream, the grey buildings and monotonous roads a fuzzy memory, the faceless masses of the city a half forgotten memory — and only now did every day become crystal clear.

The scent of rain clinging to everything. Our clothes. Her hair. Mixing with her tears.

The sensation of her body pressed against mine.

The sound of her crying with the force of a storm.

I let out a deep breath and patted her on the head.

[Autumn]

Chapter 13

More than a year ago, I wished for something extraordinary to happen.

Deep down inside, I harbored a wish I told no one about, not even the kohai I slept with every now and then. After we were done doing it, we'd lie on the bed and relax for a little while, the soundproof walls of the love hotel keeping the world at bay. Sometimes we'd go for a second and third round (about once a month, she'd have this insatiable appetite and she'd use her mouth to get me back up, and we'd go at it all night long. It was those nights that reminded me that I was past my prime even though I have yet to hit thirty). I never revealed this secret wish to her. Maybe that is why she never became my girlfriend; she could sense that there was a part of me I kept locked away from her.

My wish was simple.

I yearned for something to happen, good or bad — it didn't matter. I just wanted to see something disrupt this grey world.

I'd fantasize about a zombie apocalypse while I was on the train. If society fell apart, then I wouldn't need to go to work anymore.

Maybe an earthquake would destroy Japan. Maybe someone would assassinate the Prime Minister and a state of emergency would be declared. Maybe a repeat of the Great Kanto Earthquake.

All sorts of horrible disasters circled in my head during the commute. Millions of deaths. Endless grief. Even though I knew those thoughts were horrible and selfish, my heart still yearned for something to disrupt this monotonous world, no matter the consequences.

A quick look online revealed that lots of people in Japan had thoughts like this.

Life is such a pain… It's like eating the same seared salmon bento every day.

Screw this world. Why couldn't the Mayan prophecy come true?

I miss my high school days. Those days were filled with color. Now life is endlessly grey.

What's the point of continuing if I can never support a wife and children? I don't want to work and live alone until I die.

Online message boards were filled with posts like this. All of them sincerely wishing for something — anything — to disrupt this world, to change it, to end it.

And then a virus swept across the world and ended humanity. I suppose I got my wish — we all did.

I drove down the road in the Toyota Land Cruiser. Next to me sat Sayaka in her long-sleeved sailor uniform. Her blue skirt was on the shorter side and

exposed a bit of her white thighs. She crossed her legs, causing her skirt to ride up even higher.

That's right. Sayaka was a JK. We met in Tokyo, and a lot of things happened. In the end, we began to travel together to the Kansai region so that we could weather the winter there.

I'm traveling across Japan with a JK. Just thinking those words felt strange, but that was the simple truth.

I suppose I wasn't a salaryman anymore nor was she a JK. A salaryman could only exist within the context of a white collar worker working for a company and a JK could only exist within the context of the educational institutions of a country. Neither company nor educational institutions existed anymore. So, I suppose we were just an old man and a teenage girl.

"I wonder if Japan still exists as a country," I said as we cruised down a countryside road. Overgrown rice paddies hugged the road on both sides, like a full glass that was about to spill.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Sayaka tilted her head slightly. She opened the window on her side, causing the red ribbon of her uniform fluttered in the wind.

"I mean, the Japanese government is gone. The institutions of law and order are gone. Almost all of the people are gone. Civilization is gone. We lost the diesel generator, so we've basically tumbled down to the stone age. Does Japan as a country still exist?"

"Of course it does, right? We are two Japanese people driving through Japan."

"A country can only really exist if there are enough people and within the context of other countries."

"I kind of get it, it's like saying there can only be light if there is also darkness …but Japan will stand so long as we are alive! We represent the people of Japan."

"Wouldn't that make us the emperor and empress?"

"That's ri — "

She didn't finish her sentence. Her face turned red like the autumn leaves of the mountains that lay beyond the rice paddies.

"What's wrong?" Why was she blushing? I just said —

Oh…

"I-It's nothing," she stammered.

I finally understood. An emperor and empress were husband and wife. So if we were emperor and empress, then it would mean that not only were we lovers, but also a married couple. A married couple had the blessing of society to do *those kinds of things* at night. And an emperor and empress would have the duty to produce heirs.

An awkward silence settled in the car. It was made even more awkward by the fact that we were in an enclosed space with nowhere to run.

Autumn was here and the weather cooled down. The smell of summer had faded away together with the green landscape.

The road we drove on was nestled in a valley. The mountains on both sides had turned into different shades of orange, brown and red, as if the sunset had soaked the entire landscape in its colors.

This season always made me feel a little melancholy. Watching the leaves turn orange and fall to the ground reminded me that no matter how bright things are, eventually it will all fade away.

If youth was the summer, then adulthood was autumn.

I still remember when I was in high school, autumn signaled the end of the carefree summer, and even the most boisterous boys in my class calmed down. Watching our senpais skip club activities to prepare for entrance exams reminded us of the fact that our time together was limited — a mere three years.

“Right about now you’d be preparing for entrance exams, right?” I asked as a way to dispel the awkwardness.

“Huhn? Why are you suddenly saying that?”

“Seniors start preparing for university entrance exams in late summer and early autumn. If the world didn’t end, you’d be a senior, right?”

Sayaka looked out of the window and didn’t say anything for a moment. Then she spoke.

“Yeah, you’re right…I am a third year.” She looked out of the windows and there said, “When I was still in school, I mean before the world ended, I could kind of feel adulthood creeping up on me. Maybe it’s weird for a JK to say this, but I could feel how fleeting those precious years in high school were. I think it’s because sometimes I’d see teachers looking at us with a smile, but it was a sad smile, like they are looking at us, but not really looking at us. Once I noticed that, I got really scared because I didn’t know what I wanted to do in the future. I just wanted to live my life and have fun.”

I said nothing. Sayaka and her classmates had a falling out when the countryside locals began to discriminate against anyone who spoke with a Tokyo accent.

Every now and then, she’d show an expression that could only be found on the face of someone who wasn’t forced to mature by adulthood.

Why did those expressions seem childish to me?

I thought about it for a long time and eventually arrived at an answer.

Maturity is the awareness that in life frustrating things will happen all the time. No matter how much it hurts, all we can do is keep on going, one day at a time. This awareness is only gained after living in society for some years.

It is this awareness that creates a weathered heart — in other words, maturity.

“Live my life and have fun,” I repeated her words. “That sounds nice. It would make a good T-Shirt.”

“I never thought I’d spend my youth traveling around Japan with an uncle,” she said with a snarky grin.

“And I never thought I’d spend my time babysitting a JK,” I shot back.

“Hey! You’re being rude.”

“You started it.”

“You’re being childish.”

“You are calling me childish?”

We looked at each other and laughed. A gust blew past us, filling the car with fresh air. I breathed in the autumn scent, but for some reason, it didn’t make me feel melancholy.

[Autumn]

Chapter 14

A little while later, we came to a stop. The road split into three different directions and there were no signs to help us.

"How are we supposed to know which road leads to Osaka," I said.

"Let's have a look at the map."

"Okay."

We spread our map of the area out on the hood of the car and placed Sayaka's compass on it.

"So north is that way," I said.

"Mh-hmm…"

"Knowing that is useless if we have no idea where we are on the map. Knowing which way is north still doesn't tell us which road to drive on."

"It's too bad there aren't any locals we can ask for help."

"Even if there are locals who survived, I doubt they'd want to help us since we speak with a Tokyo accent."

"I can do a pretty good Kansai accent." Sayaka gave me the thumbs up.

"No, you can't."

"You didn't even listen to it!"

"Kanto people are almost always bad at Kansai accents."

"Yer ain't gonna believe how good ma' accent is 'till y' 'ear it."

"I don't think that's a Kansai accent. You're just making it up."

"You're so mean!" Sayaka cried and punched my back.

On our way from Niigata, we came across many roadblocks that forced us to turn back and find an alternative route. Soon, we were hopelessly lost and could only rely on the compass to give us a general sense of direction. It really was a miracle that we somehow managed to make it this far.

"Ouch… Anyway, we need some kind of landmark that we can use as a reference point."

Sayaka reached into her backpack and took out a pair of binoculars. After adjusting them, she said, "Hmm…I think I can see something far off in the distance…is that some kind of bridge?"

"The highways here run mostly on the ground. It should be a Shinkansen bridge."

Sayaka handed me the binoculars. I looked through them and then looked at the map. "We have already driven past Hamamatsu and Nagoya… then in that case…that should be the Tokaido-Sanyo Shinkansen line."

"Have you taken the Tokaido-Sanyo line before?"

That was a bit of an odd question. It felt like there is a deeper meaning to this, but I decided to answer her nonetheless.

"Yeah, I had to take it a couple of times when I had to meet clients in Osaka. The first time I traveled there was with my manager. He was meeting clients from Singapore; he wanted me to observe the meeting so

that I could learn from him. More importantly, he wanted me to learn how to handle foreign clients since I was one of the few people in the office who could speak English."

"Heee, it sounds like you were a star on the rise. If it wasn't for the world ending, maybe you would be rich and successful by now?"

I laughed. "Not a chance. About a year later, my manager became the casualty of office politics and he was demoted to a branch somewhere in Hokkaido. Once I lost his backing, there was no way for me to climb the ladder quickly. And anyways," I reached into my pocket, feeling the sudden urge to smoke, "I lost the desire to climb the ladder."

"So you can speak English?"

"Not fluently, but I can carry a conversation."

"English was always my worst subject."

"It seems like a lot of high schoolers struggle with English."

She looked at me and chuckled.

"What is it?"

"Mm, it's nothing. It just feels like…I've learnt something new about Yamada-san today. That makes me happy."

"I guess I never really told you much about my office life. It's not like there is much to talk about."

Honestly, I've been avoiding the topic of my former office life with her ever since she forced me to tell her about my affair with my *kohai*. It feels weird to tell a JK about this kind of stuff, especially since we travel together.

Sayaka leaned against the hood of the car and gazed up at the vast blue sky. With the factories in Japan, China and Korea forever shut down, the air has become pristine. I remember the times when a strong wind from Mongolia meant that the pollution from Beijing would be blown over to Tokyo.

"Why do you want to know about the Shinkansen line?" I asked.

She didn't answer for a moment and simply continued to look up at the cloudless blue.

"I've always wanted to take the Tokaido-Sanyo Shinkansen."

"Why? Is there something special about it?"

"Of course! It was the first Shinkansen line that was ever built, and it goes from Tokyo to Osaka. Imagine sitting in the Green Car and going from Shinjuku station all the way to Shin-Osaka. You'd be able to see Mount Fuji and it — it would just feel so cool! Tokyo to Osaka! And then a side trip to Kyoto!"

"Oh." There wasn't really anything else I could say. I just found it strange that she was so enthusiastic and curious about something so ordinary.

Sayaka continued.

"And I've always wanted to eat those exclusive line-specific Shinkansen bentos. You know those special train bentos that you can only buy on a single Shinkansen line."

"Didn't you take the Shinkansen to go to Disneyland?"

“Yeah, but that was only a short trip because Niigata and Tokyo are so close. I’ve wanted to go on a long cross-country Shinkansen trip, eat exclusive boxed lunches, buy exclusive stuff from vending machines at specific stations and so on.”

“Ehhh…” My voice trailed off.

“What is it?”

“I hate to disappoint you, but those boxed lunches aren’t any good. The food is cold and the rice is dry. The whole thing tastes stale and artificial.”

“For someone who hates train bentos so much, you sure know a lot about them.”

“There’s no time for lunch once I arrive in Osaka, so I usually eat on the train. I didn’t have much of a choice. The restaurants at the stations weren’t very good either.”

“You sound like a very picky eater.”

“I’m not picky. It’s just as you grow older, your palate develops, and you appreciate better food.”

“Now you sound like an old man.”

“I’m still young, relatively speaking.”

“Relative to me or relative to the dead?”

“Relative to other adults.”

“I see, I see…,” She put a finger to her chin. “But then…why are Shinkansen boxed lunches so famous if they taste as bad as you say?”

She really wasn’t willing to let go of her bento box fantasy.

I sighed through my nose.

“I heard that the boxed lunches from before the Shinkansen era were really good.”

“From before the Shinkansen era? Did such a time even exist?”

“Of course. Before the Tokaido-Sanyo line, there was no Shinkansen.”

“I know this sounds stupid, but it’s hard to imagine Japan without the Shinkansen. Like it wouldn’t be Japan without the Shinkansen.”

“You should tell that to the people in the early Showa era,” I said and laughed.

Sayaka pouted and punched my shoulder.

“Hnghh! Why do you look so happy?”

I looked at her and said, ”I feel like I’ve learned something new about you today.”

“Eh? What did you learn?” She looked slightly embarrassed, like she was worried she might have accidentally revealed a maiden’s secrets.

“You are a train idiot.”

“I’m not! It’s normal to be a little obsessed with trains, okay?”

“Sure, sure.”

“You sound totally insincere! I hope you go bald!”

“My father had a full head of hair until he was sixty. I won’t go bald for a long time.”

“Hnghhh!”

Sayaka and I bantered for a while and then we returned to looking at the map. In the end, we couldn't figure out where to go, even with a reference point, so we flipped a coin. Coins didn't have monetary value anymore, but they were still useful for these kinds of things.

We took the path that led us south and drove past several towns that all looked more or less identical.

A national highway going through the middle of the town. One or two gas stations. A pachinko store, a DVD rental place, some chain restaurants. Towns like these existed all over Japan. The kind of no-name town most high school students wanted to escape after graduation.

Over the past couple of weeks, we passed by countless no-name towns like this, and we got to see how the pandemic was handled outside of Tokyo, or rather, how the people there chose to die.

Some towns turned into a battlefield and burned themselves to the ground. It was unclear how the virus could've caused this kind of extremely violent civil unrest in a peaceful country like Japan. The remains of charred corpses littered the road. We had to drive over them.

Other towns remained untouched. We searched those places and found no one. Not a single dead body, not even a smashed window. It was as if everyone got spirited away into another world. At that time, I couldn't help but laugh because it made me think of an *isekai* novel.

Reincarnated in Another World With Every Resident of the No-Name Town I Wanted to Escape!

Sayaka never heard of the isekai genre before, so it was quite tricky to explain that joke to her. In the end, she just gave me a weird look that told me that she wasn't really interested in that sort of stuff.

In another town, we encountered the same situation — an empty untouched town — but we soon discovered where all the residents went.

In a field a short distance away, there was a massive hole that was filled with dead bodies. In other words, it was a mass grave. The residents of this town had all committed suicide together.

We drove away as quickly as possible, but it took us weeks to recover from that memory.

There was also another town that had clearly been agriculture orientated because the streets were overrun with farm animals. Some of the domesticated cows came towards us, desperate for human attention. We milked them and got some fresh milk, but we couldn't take the animals with us.

We discovered that a lot of the farm animals had died within their enclosures. Without human care, they couldn't escape the cages and they either starved to death or died from the cold during the last winter.

Some gates had been opened, allowing them to escape. At least some of the farmers managed to do that before they succumbed to the virus.

The farm animals that did survive mixed with wild animals, and we saw some cows being eaten by wolves and bears. I suppose for wild animals that

were accustomed to hunting, these domestic farm animals, who were lost without their human masters, made an easy meal.

We also saw packs of dogs fighting off wolves. The dogs had clearly been domesticated before, because they were no match for the wild wolves, but the dogs usually outnumbered the wolves. We didn't stay to watch the result of those fights.

However, no matter how much we feared and dreaded the horror that might await us when we entered a town, Sayaka and I had to go in. We needed to refuel, and the easiest way to do that was to use a small pump and a rubber pipe we had taken from a hardware store and siphon fuel out of local cars.

We couldn't refill at gas stations because there was no electricity to operate the powerful pumps and the fuel tanks were locked underground beneath several layers of concrete. With just the two of us, there was no way we could get to that supply.

After a few more days of traveling, we came across a highway sign that made Sayaka yell, "Stop!"

I stopped the car, and she got out.

"Yamada-san! Look! Look!"

"What is it?"

She was jumping up and down and pointed at the sign above us. It indicated that we were getting closer to Osaka, which was our checkpoint. Our plan was to find a suitable place in Kyoto or somewhere nearby to settle down for the winter. I've never spent winter down in Kansai before, but since it is much further south than Tokyo, the winters here should be quite warm.

"The sign says Nara!" she said.

"Oh, so?"

"It's Nara! Nara!"

"So?"

"Don't you get it? We will be able to see some real authentic deer there!"

"You never came to Kyoto or Nara on a school trip?"

"My school planned on taking us here for our third-year trip. They wanted to make it special because it would be our last chance to make memories. But then the world ended, so…"

"Right, I get it."

"I was reaaaaally looking forward to seeing the deer in Nara Park and feeding them. Yamada-san, you don't look excited at all."

"Uhm, don't misunderstand, I do think that seeing deer in Nara Park is exciting; we saw wolves and bears on our way here — deer are kind of boring in comparison, no?"

Sayaka put her hands on her hips. "Geez, you just don't get it. Nara is special! Nara has many World Heritage Sites like those ancient temples and the deer there are super cute! So we have to go there."

"How do you even know stuff like this?"

I knew that Nara was famous, but I've never heard about this World Heritage Site stuff.

"I read about it in a travel guide after we finished all the video games."

"I see."

"Come on, let's go to Nara."

"Kyoto is only an hour away from Nara, so we can make a detour. It's not like we have anything else to do. But…I think you should be prepared to be disappointed."

"Huh? Why?"

"You'll see."

A little while later, we arrived in Nara. We drove past Nara Park, and, just like the other places we passed through before, it was completely empty. There were some abandoned cars and buses on the road, but for the most part, it looked like the people had suddenly disappeared. Most likely they were all rotting in their homes, just like in Tokyo.

"Ehhhhh? Where are all the deer?"

Nara Park was completely empty. It was just a big empty space. A brown flat field with nothing in it. From pictures, I knew that this was the place where all the deer gathered to be fed rice crackers by tourists who bought them from local vendors.

But now both tourists and deer are gone.

"I heard that the deer of Nara have been living in harmony with the locals for hundreds of years, look, there's even street signs that tell cars to watch out for them," I said. "But the animals gather here because this is where they can get fed by tourists. Once the tourists stopped coming, they likely retreated into the mountains because there isn't enough food for them here."

Sayaka slumped back in her seat.

"You are right. I am disappointed."

"If we're lucky, we might find some deer hanging around the area."

We drove through the city, past Nara station, past the bus station. Eventually we reached Nara JR station and there we saw two deer nibbling on the grass that sprouted from the cracks in the pavement.

Sayaka's face lit up. She grabbed my sleeve and pointed at the deer.

"Look, Yamada-san! Deer! Oh my god, they are *shoo kyute*!"

She jumped out of the car and ran towards the animals. They raised their heads and bowed to Sayaka, as if they were politely greeting her. She began to pet them; the deer sniffed her hands and school uniform.

"Kyaa! Their tongues are so slippery and warm! *Nee*, Yamada-san, do you want to pet them too?"

I got out of the car and went over.

Hmm, these two deer look quite old and quite thin. Maybe they have been fed by tourists for most of their lives and couldn't break their habit of coming to Nara looking for humans to feed them.

I wonder if these two old ones couldn't compete with the younger males for territory in the mountains and came here hoping for someone to feed them, even though humans had disappeared for about a year at this point.

"Wait," I said and went back to the car. I came back with a pack of rice crackers. The deer seemed to recognize this type of packaging because they abandoned Sayaka and turned their attention to me.

"Hey!" Sayaka pouted.

"They must be hungry."

I handed Sayaka a pack of rice crackers and the deer almost snapped them out of her hands.

"Whoa! They are pushing each other."

"Be careful, don't let them bite you."

"Okay."

She ripped the packaging open and fed them the contents. A few rice crackers fell to the ground and they were quickly snapped up by the two of them. Once they were done eating, they looked at us expectantly, wanting more.

"Sorry, Deer-san, we don't have more food," Sayaka said.

She spread out her hands to show that she had nothing left. I did the same. The deer recognized this signal and walked away.

"Ehh, they immediately lost interest," she said.

"They must be desperate for food," I said. "Especially if they have gotten used to being fed by tourists."

Now that we have made it to Kanto, we should focus on finding a suitable place to stay for the winter.

A gentle gust blew past us, but instead of the clean air often associated with places like this, it carried the same stench that drove us out of Tokyo.

"Yamada-san, this smell…do you think it's from decomposing bodies?"

"Yeah, probably, since we're in the city center. A lot of people must've died in their homes."

The city looked clean and peaceful, but just like in Tokyo, every building was a graveyard.

"It's getting late. We should leave the city and find somewhere to sleep. And tomorrow we need to find a suitable place for the winter."

"Mh, yeah. I don't want to sleep in the car again."

"Sorry about that."

"Mm, I don't mind. It's just that I can't really sleep in a car seat. You felt the same, right?"

"…yeah."

One time, several weeks before we arrived in Nara, somewhere between Shizuoka and Nagoya, we had to take a detour that led us away from the main road and along the coastline because there was a major pileup of

abandoned cars blocking our way. I decided to take a local road that led us deep into the mountains of Aichi (or at least I think it was Aichi). The streetlights obviously didn't work anymore, and we were in the middle of the mountains; so when night fell, we were stuck in complete darkness. The car's headlights could barely penetrate the moonless night, forcing us to come to a complete stop since it was dangerous drive with little sight.

In the middle of the night, we heard the howl of wolves and saw a bear claw at the car doors. It used its body to push the car and the vehicle rocked, but it luckily stayed on its wheels. The car seats were already uncomfortable and the presence of wild predators kept both of us wide awake. Needless to say, we were both sleep deprived after a sleepless night like that.

In the morning, we found that the bear had slashed up a front wheel and damaged the windscreen wipers. Fortunately we found a spare tire and some tools in the trunk of the car (thank you, former owner), but since neither of us had done this sort of thing before, changing the wheel took the entire morning and afternoon. We couldn't look up tutorials on UTube either since the Internet didn't exist anymore and none of the books we took from Kinokuniya were about car repairs.

By the time we got to Nagoya, it was already night again. We broke into a fancy hotel near Nagoya JR station and slept on soft, fluffy beds. Even there, Sayaka insisted that we stay in the same room. Was she afraid I'd vanish when she woke up? The idea of being alone in this godforsaken world must scare her to the core.

I would never admit it to her, but I was also afraid of being alone. Hearing her soft breathing while she slept on the bed next to mine was reassuring.

Although I couldn't help but wonder what society would think if people knew that a salaryman and a JK had spent a night together in the small space of a car and even shared hotel rooms.

Just thinking those words made everything feel illicit. Like compensated dating or something like that.

We stayed in Nagoya for several days, robbing convenience stores, doing a bit of sightseeing, and stocking up on supplies.

A lot of other things happened in Nagoya, but that is a story for another time.

Anyway, back to Nara.

[Autumn]

Chapter 15

Sayaka and I left Nara behind without looking at the World Heritage Sites. We were going to spend the winter in Kansai anyway, so there'd be plenty of time to explore the local sights.

We followed the main road and soon we were outside of Nara and heading towards Kyoto. It was somewhere between those two cities that I saw something that caused me to step on the brakes.

"Sayaka! Look!"

"Huhn?"

I pointed at a building. It looked like an ordinary ryokan — except light was coming out the windows.

"L-Lights – electricity," Sayaka stammered.

We looked at each other and saw the same emotion reflected in each other's eyes: hope.

If there really was someone there, then they would be the first survivors we've met since Sayaka's classmates in Niigata.

After coming across no one in Shizuoka and Nagoya, we figured that there were no other survivors, but now…

"There must be someone in there," I said.

"And they have electricity! They must have a working generator!"

I turned into the driveway and drove up to the entrance of the ryokan. As soon as I stopped, a person came out of the front entrance.

"Hmm?"

"Hoh?"

Sayaka and I blinked.

The person who came out to meet us was an old woman. Her hair was gray and fading and wrinkles stretched across her face. She wore a kimono and her hair was tied up in the *nihongami* style.

"Welcome," she said and bowed. "Do you have a reservation?"

I blinked. Was she a ghost? Why was she speaking like this when the world had already ended?

"Erm…we don't have a reservation," Sayaka answered.

"I see. That is not a problem. Please come in."

Sayaka and I looked at each other. We shrugged at the same time.

We followed the old lady to the reception area.

It was a luxury ryokan. Once inside, you could immediately see an indoor garden behind glass walls. There were several sofas and bookshelves, as well as traditional ink paintings hanging off the walls. The lantern-like lights gave the interior an almost otherworldly feeling.

"Granny, are you the only survivor in this area?" Sayaka asked.

"Hey, it's rude to call her that. I am so sorry." I bowed and pushed Sayaka's head down.

The old woman laughed.

“It’s alright, I don’t mind. No one has called me Granny in a long time.” She looked at us with a kind smile. “Young man, you can call me that too.”

“O-Okay.”

I couldn’t help but blush a little. Why did I feel embarrassed? Maybe it’s because I was being treated like a child in front of Sayaka. I could hear her giggling behind me.

The old woman went behind the desk and picked out a key.

“I’d like to offer you the finest room our ryokan has. The deluxe room with a private bath and mountain view.”

“T-Thank you, but we don’t have any money,” Sayaka said.

“Please don’t worry about that,” she said, her smile never leaving her face.

She gave us the key and guided us to our room, which was on the second floor.

“Wow! You can see the mountains from here, and the private bath is huge!” Sayaka’s eyes widened.

“T-This is too much, please let us repay you for your kindness,” I said.

Granny shook her head.

“Please don’t worry about that,” she said again. “There are no other guests, and there will likely never be any other guests.”

She smiled wryly as she said those words. I couldn’t think of anything to say in reply.

“Dinner will be ready in two hours. If there is anything you need, please let me know.” She bowed and left the room.

Sayaka and I stared at the door, our eyes wide and blinking.

“Is she a ghost?” Sayaka asked.

“I was wondering the same thing…”

“How can a ryokan be fully operational more than a year after the pandemic? Is that even possible?” Sayaka asked.

“And it looks like Granny is the only remaining staff member. Don’t tell me that she is the only one working here.”

“I didn’t see anyone else, so she must be the only one…”

We looked at each other.

“Yamada-san, is this one of those haunted places where once you enter you can never leave, and, before you know it, you’ve spent years in this house and the evil spirit has sucked the life out of you.”

“You’ve read too much manga,” I said. “But…I don’t think this is the case.”

Seriously, it did feel a little creepy.

Regardless, those words seemed to calm her down. Sayaka fell onto the floor. She rolled around on the tatami mats. “Tatami mats feel so good after sitting in the car for so long.”

She let out a satisfied sigh and smiled.

“Anyway, let’s take a bath first,” I said.

Sayaka looked away. Her ears were red.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“You can go ahead.”

“Okay.”

I stripped and lowered myself into the outdoor bath. I let out a groan. This is the first hot bath I’ve taken since the Tokyo power grid failed. On our way here, Sayaka and I washed using bottled water. We could’ve heated up some water, but it felt like a waste to fill up a bathtub. Besides, we were on the road and didn’t have access to a bath.

I leaned back. To think that I have come all the way to Kansai with Sayaka.

A year ago, I was holed up in my apartment, listening to the city growing quieter with each passing day, my neighbors breathing their last, waiting for the virus to come for me.

And then in the spring, I met a JK at a convenience store.

I would never admit this out loud, but deep down I felt fulfilled. Every day was an adventure. There was no pressure and no endless, pointless paperwork. There was only one simple goal: go South to survive the winter.

The simplicity of this goal gave color to my life. A singular purpose that cleared away the grayness of adult life.

And unlike the stiff workplace relationships where the air simply didn’t allow for sincere friendships to form, I spent every day chatting with Sayaka.

“Heh…” I smiled wryly. I only felt the tiniest bit of sorrow over the loss of what the world once was. I’m a terrible adult.

“Pardon the intrusion.”

“Hmm?”

Sayaka stood behind me, her uniform nowhere to be seen. Instead, she had a towel wrapped around her body — a towel which barely reached her thighs and only just covered her chest.

“S-Sayaka?!”

I couldn’t help but stare at her chest. This was the first time I’ve seen her like this, and without the uniform on, her chest looked even larger.

Could those be…F-cups?

“I want to wash my hair, I feel gross otherwise, but long hair takes a while to dry…so I thought it might be better to take a bath quickly.”

“R-Right, just let me get out and — “

“Mm, it’s okay. I don’t mind. Erm…j-just look away for a moment.”

I averted my gaze.

Sayaka sat down on the stool, rinsed herself using the shower head, and then got into the bath. There was a gentle splash, and she sat down next to me, an arm’s length away.

I glanced at her — her cleavage peeked just out of the water. Her long black hair was tied up in a neat bun; I could see the nape of her neck and her exposed shoulders.

My kohai and I often took baths together in the love hotel's giant high-tech bathtubs after we were done and sometimes we'd do it again, but I never felt nervous then. It was just something that happened.

So why was my heart pounding when Sayaka came in?

I felt like a teenager all over again. Like when the girl you like sits down next to you, and suddenly your arms and shoulders are pulsing.

"Sorry," I said. "I should've let you take a bath first. I didn't think you'd want to wash your hair."

"Mm," Sayaka shook her head, "I was the one who told you to jump in first."

We sat in silence for a while, enjoying the heat. My sore muscles relaxed, and I breathed deeply through my nose. If this ryokan is haunted and Sayaka and I were dying, I'd be almost fine with it.

Although I would probably try to negotiate with the evil spirits to let Sayaka go.

Sacrificing yourself for the sake of a cute girl — that's every man's dream, no? It would be a good death. At least better than *karoshi*.

I could hear Sayaka's breathing, and I'm sure she could hear mine.

"*Nee,* Yamada-san, do you know why Nara is so special?"

"Because of the deer, right?"

"Other than that."

"Uhm… It used to be the capital city if I remember right. It was the capital before Kyoto."

"You're partially right."

"Please enlighten me, Sayaka-*sensei*."

"If my student is begging for instruction, then I suppose I have no choice," she said with a dramatic sigh. "It is said that the sense of being Japanese was formed during the Nara Period and the following Heian period. It is here in Nara that the first major work of Japanese literature was produced. At the time, Japan was heavily influenced by China; the people still used the Chinese writing system, and followed Chinese fashions and religion. Even the city layout itself was copied from the capital of the Tang Dynasty. But it is here where a sense of Japanese identity was born."

"Whoa, how do you know all of this?"

"I found a history manga in Kinokuniya and stole — I mean, took it."

Ah, I did remember Sayaka reading a manga where she complained that it was more like a textbook than a manga. It looks like she read it closely though.

"It's kind of amazing what kind of things you will learn once you stop playing *soshages* and start reading, huh."

"I still prefer to play games and watch movies though."

“Me too.”

Sayaka and I looked at each other and laughed.

For a second, both of us forgot that we were naked.

“We’re going to spend the winter here, so we can take our time and look at all the famous sites,” I said.

“Mh! Let’s do that.”

I looked up at the night sky. More than a thousand years ago, the people of the Nara period were looking up at the same stars. I wonder what they would think if they knew that Japan, and the world, would turn out like this.

Would they think that it couldn’t be helped? Or would they admonish their descendants for being unable to weather a disaster?

I got out of the bath first and Sayaka followed a little while later. We put on yukatas that we found in the closet and went downstairs for dinner.

At the bottom of the stairs we found a sign that guided us to the dining room.

Granny was already there waiting for us.

“Please have a seat, dinner will be served shortly.”

Sayaka and I sat down at a table, and a few minutes later, she came back with a cart.

“Today we have vegetable hotpot,” she said. “I apologize for not serving any meat. We ran out last year when the farms stopped delivering.”

“No, it’s quite alright. We are sorry for imposing on you,” I said.

She put two little sukiyaki pots in front of us.

Sayaka and I looked at the pots and then at each other, our eyes wide. The little hotspots were filled with fresh tofu and vegetables. Under normal circumstances, this would’ve been a very plain meal, but it’s been half a year since we’ve seen fresh vegetables.

“A-Are those fresh vegetables?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“H-How is that possible? The supermarkets stopped getting fresh produce over a year ago.”

“Oh, I grow these in my own garden. Please feel free to eat as much as you like.”

She served us two bowls of glistening white rice.

Our jaws dropped.

“There is plenty more,” she said.

Sayaka and I haven’t tasted steamed fresh white rice since the power grid failed in Tokyo.

“Y-You can still cook white rice?” I asked.

“I use the backup generator for lights and heat. I use a donabe and fire to cook the rice. It gives the rice a distinct taste.”

“H-How – “

“In the past everyone in Japan cooked like this. It’s really nothing special.”

Suddenly I felt ashamed for barely knowing how to use an electric rice cooker.

“Uhm…if you don’t mind, I have a few questions,” I said.

“Please ask me anything you’d like to know.”

“Are you the only survivor in Nara?”

Her professional expression froze for a moment, then she nodded gently.

“About a year ago, the virus swept through the region and suddenly Nara became very quiet. So many deer were desperate for food, but there was no one to feed them. My staff stopped coming in for work. Even my husband got infected. In the end, I was the only one left.”

Her voice didn’t crack. She spoke with a sense of wistful resignation.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said.

“No, please, don’t be. Everything will come to an end eventually, and I suppose the end of humanity has finally arrived. Us survivors are the remnants of a civilization that once was. We are a mere afterimage.”

She spoke those words without spite or bitterness, but like someone who was sad to see the summer fade and the leaves fall from the trees.

“Based on your accent, you two are from Tokyo?”

“That’s right. I am Yamada Daisuke.”

“My name is Fujiwara Sayaka. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Sayaka…Daisuke, what lovely names.”

She didn’t volunteer her own name, and I didn’t ask.

“Is the situation the same in Tokyo as it is here?”

“Yes, that’s right. Erm…Sayaka and I are the only survivors from Tokyo. We decided to travel south to Kansai when the power grid in Tokyo failed. It will be too cold to spend the winter there without any heating.”

“Oh…so your plan is to stay in Nara for the winter.”

“That is the plan.”

“The winters here in Kansai are very cold too. You might have to travel further south, all the way to Kyushu. I hear the winters there are rather mild.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how did you survive last winter?”

“The power still worked last winter, so I was able to turn the heating on. But just like in Tokyo, the power grid in Nara has failed and right now this ryokan is powered by a backup generator. Although it is pretty old and there are no spare parts. Once it breaks, there will be no way to repair it.”

“I see…in that case, would you like to come to Kyushu with us?”

Granny smiled kindly. “Thank you for your kind offer, but don’t worry about me. I’ve been through tougher things than a cold winter. Actually if you want, you can take the generator with you. I can get through the winter just fine.”

I blinked. For a moment I couldn’t believe what I just heard. Was she offering us the generator? The very thing her survival depended on?

“W-What? I’m sorry, I think I misheard.”

“You’re welcome to take the generator with you.”

Was such kindness even possible? Offering this kind of help to strangers wasn't normal, right? Or maybe only the current era was like that. Perhaps people in the past were much more generous?

"That would be too much," I said. "We couldn't possibly take the generator away from you."

Granny nodded. "I understand, but if you change your mind, just let me know. I really mean it when I say that I can get through the winter just fine. I was born in 1930, and I was only a little girl during the war."

"I-I see."

"My brothers were drafted to fight the Americans, and my father was stationed in Shanghai. None of them made it back, and after the war it was just me and my mother. We had to fend for ourselves. Ahh…those were tough times."

She must be far older than she looks. If she was alive during the war, then she must be well over a hundred. It was my first time meeting someone who was alive back then.

To think that she is running a ryokan at her age… the people from that era sure were tough. And on top of that, she can cook rice using a donabe. I've only ever seen that kind of traditional cooking on TV.

"Silly me, I've been rambling on. Please enjoy your dinner," she said, and left the dining room.

I honestly wanted her to stay and eat with us, but it looks like she'd rather keep our relationship as guest and staff. Even the end of the world couldn't change her attitude towards work. Somehow I found that to be both moving and frightening at the same time.

"Are we really going to leave her here?" Sayaka asked.

"I don't know…it's not like we can force her to come with us."

"If her backup generator breaks, then she will freeze to death."

I said nothing for a moment. What to do? It felt wrong to leave this old lady behind, but at the same time we couldn't force her to come with us.

"Let's eat first."

It was our first proper meal in a long time. When we were on the road, we picked fruits from abandoned farms we passed by, but for the most part we ate canned food, energy bars, and cup noodles. None of it tasted very good, but it gave us the calories we needed to keep going.

"I want miso soup" and "*I wanna eat white rice"* were the two most common complaints we aired whenever we couldn't sleep.

Tonight, we finished every last grain of rice and drank all the broth in the sukiyaki pot.

"That was a good meal," I groaned.

"Thank you for the food," Sayaka said with a satisfied sigh.

We both massaged our stomachs.

Moments after we finished, Granny came back with coffee and dessert.

"Was the meal to your liking?" she asked.

"It was the best meal of my life," Sayaka said.

“Me too.”

She laughed gently. “Thank you. Hearing that makes me very happy. Please drink the coffee while it’s hot. It’s made using specially imported Arabica beans.”

I didn’t know much about coffee, but the moment the bitter liquid touched my tongue, I could tell that it was different from the instant coffee I drank at the office.

Sayaka added milk and sugar to hers.

“Yamada-san, you drink your coffee black?”

“I used to drink black coffee when I worked overtime…which was every night.”

“Whoa.”

“You’ll learn to like the bitter taste when you’re older.”

“…”

“Sayaka?”

“Hmph.”

She pouted.

Did I say something that angered her?

I turned to Granny.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come to Kyushu with us? It will be warmer down there.”

She shook her head.

“I am thankful for your concern,” she said with a gentle smile. “But my place is here. You two should go. You are still young. An old lady like me has lived long enough. This will be my resting place.”

“R-Right.”

There was nothing else I could say. Her mind was made up. I sensed an immovable iron will behind that kind smile. Suddenly I could feel the difference in life experience separating us. Compared to her, I was just a boy. She witnessed Japan losing the war, the end of the empire, the end of the bubble era, and now the end of the world — and yet she lives on.

“I apologize for my rudeness,” I bowed my head. “I did not mean to be conceited.”

“Please raise your head,” she said. “Please, you two young ones must live on.”

“I understand.”

After the coffee, I felt the urge to have a smoke.

“The smoking area is next to the lobby,” she said before I could even ask. It was as if she could read my mind. I wonder if most male guests felt like having a smoke after dinner.

“Thanks.” I got up. Then I said to Sayaka, “I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Mm, sure.”

Usually she would insist on going with me, but I suppose since I’d still be in the same building, she didn’t feel the same sense of anxiety.

I went to the lobby and found the smoking room. I sat down inside and lit up a cigarette.

“Ah…” This feels good.

I leaned back and blew the smoke through my nose. I should probably cut back on smoking, for my own sake, but also for Sayaka’s. She’d often complain about the smell on my clothes and would force me to change.

The lobby was empty. There were numerous sofa chairs lined up, and no one would ever sit in them again.

I imagined that during the peak tourist season, this lobby would be full of people. The sofas would be occupied by families who are getting ready to catch a bus to Nara Park to see the deer. Foreigners would be looking at maps. Tour guides might wait outside.

How long has Granny managed this ryokan? Twenty years? Thirty? A lifetime of effort had been poured into this building and now there were no more guests to serve.

[Autumn]

Chapter 16

[Sayaka]

Yamada-san left the dining room. I felt a jolt of anxiety run through me, and I wanted to follow him.

Should I do that?

We've been spending every day together since spring. There were a few times when he wanted to go outside on his own, but I was selfish and forced him to take me with him.

I suppose he is taking care of *that* kind of need right now. He's a man after all.

I did feel bad that he had to hold back for my sake. Before the end of the world, I read on a net blog that it is important for guys to find release. With me around, he couldn't do that. It got worse since we left Tokyo and spent all of our time in the car.

Although I wouldn't mind if he…

What am I thinking?

I shook my head vigorously.

"Sayaka-chan, are you okay?"

Granny looked at me with worried eyes.

"Mm, it's nothing."

I thought she'd clear the table and leave the room after Yamada-san went to smoke, but she oddly enough didn't do that. Instead, she was looking at me. It was as if she was waiting for a moment where she could be alone with me.

"Uhm, is something the matter?" I asked.

"You are a young woman, so you might need this," she reached into her sleeves and pulled out a red pack with *'0.01'* written on it. "It is important to use protection, especially since there are no more hospitals."

My face flushed red. Did she really think Yamada-san and I did *that* kind of thing at night? Do we look that close? Is that what other people think when they see us? R-Really?

"Uhm… No, actually, uhm…"

She touched my hand.

"It's alright, you don't need to explain anything. At your age, you have your needs; he has his needs as well. Guests don't need to explain their relationship to the staff. Your privacy is very important, so normally I wouldn't do this kind of thing, but these are special times."

"N-No, that's not what I meant. Uhm…we're not like *that*. We j-just travel together."

Granny's professional expression dropped for a moment, and her face was filled with surprise.

“O-Oh, I am terribly sorry. I did something unnecessary. I saw you two and I thought that you are a beautiful couple. To think that you two are siblings.”

“W-Wait! That’s also a misunderstanding. We’re not siblings. I’m a regular student, and he is a regular salaryman. We didn’t know each other before the pandemic and only met afterwards.”

“I see… in that case…”

She pressed the pack into my hands.

“You might still need this. You never know when it might happen. You are a bit young to know this, but the mood for a night together can come out of nowhere, especially in these strange times. Men and women have their needs after all.”

To be honest, whenever we broke into a convenience store, I’d glance at shelves that sold these things. It did occur to me to take some in case Yamada-san and I get into *that* kind of mood and end up doing it. Actually, I’m more surprised it hasn’t happened yet.

“T-T-Thank you…” I uttered.

My face felt so hot that I was worried she might see how embarrassed I was.

“There is no need to be embarrassed,” she said, her tone suddenly stern. She sounded a bit like a teacher. Hearing that kind of voice made me sit up straight. “Most people in this country have died, and we all need someone by our side. In this situation, we can’t worry too much about the morals of the past and be picky about who we are with.”

Her wrinkled hands touched my cheek. They felt warm and gentle. “He has much to learn, both of you do, but your man looks reliable, and he seems to have his heart in the right place. You can trust me on this; I’ve lived long enough to develop an eye for people.”

“I-I understand.”

The idea of me and Yamada-san doing it… My heart pounded in my chest.

Granny used her hand to cover her mouth as she laughed softly.

“I feel so sorry for Yamada-san,” she said. “He has such a cute girl by his side, and he is able to hold himself back. How admirable.”

“I did tell him before that if he touched me, I would shoot him.”

“Hmm, that’s good. You can’t make it too easy for him.”

The corners of her eyes smiled.

I realized that she was teasing me.

“Geez, Granny, stop teasing me.”

“Oh, my darling child.” She cupped my face. “Don’t worry, I won’t be able to hear anything of happens on the second floor.” She winked.

I felt so embarrassed that I wanted to sink into the floor and disappear forever.

[Autumn]

Chapter 17

When I came back to the dining room after smoking, I noticed that Sayaka's face was oddly red and Granny was in a good mood.

"Did something happen while I was gone?" I asked.

Sayaka said nothing. She held something red in her hands, but before I could ask her what it was, she quickly stuffed the box into her skirt pocket.

Ah, it must be those things that girls don't like to talk about — the thing for that time of the month.

"Please don't worry about it," Granny said with a vague smile.

"O-Okay."

I offered to wash the dishes, but she turned me down.

"You two are guests, please leave everything to me."

I felt bad for having her do all the work, but she was a professional; it would've been rude to continue to insist. But in a time when money has lost its value, it would be even more insulting to pay her with it.

"Please let us repay you for your service in some way," I said. "Money has lost its value already, so if there is anything we can do for you, please do not hesitate to ask."

"Hmm…when I was younger, in the old era…my mother taught me that there is just one more thing that is more valuable than food or money."

"What is that?"

"Information."

"R-Right. If it's something I know, I will gladly tell you."

She looked at me, her face no longer smiling.

"Young man, please tell me about what happened in Tokyo. I've heard terrible rumors, but the television networks in Kansai shut down quite early during the pandemic, so there was no way for me to confirm the stories I've heard."

"Yamada-san." Sayaka tugged my sleeve. She looked worried. I understood what she meant. Telling this kind old lady the terrible truth — was that a proper way to repay her?

"Please tell me the truth," she said, her voice calm and steady. "I may be old, but I've seen enough."

"Right, in that case…"

I told her about how the Tokyo government declared a state of emergency and most people stayed at home, but a portion of people didn't listen and fled the city. Rumors about the virus being imported through Narita airport spread throughout the region and anyone speaking with a Tokyo accent was discriminated against and blamed for the spread of the virus.

“I was chased out of Niigata because of my accent, and when we were traveling, we saw the remains of what could’ve been battles between the locals and groups of Tokyoites,” Sayaka said.

“And what about the people who stayed in Tokyo?”

I gulped. Sayaka and I rarely talked about what happened during the summer in Tokyo. Just remembering the smell made me feel nauseous.

“The imported vaccines were rendered obsolete by new mutations, and so people stayed in their homes. In the end, everyone died quietly at home.”

“I see…”

Granny’s expression was somber. She let out a long sigh.

“My mother was born to a Korean immigrant and a Japanese woman. She was in Tokyo during the Great Kanto Earthquake,” she said after a moment of silence. “During that time, the locals blamed the fire that started because of the earthquake on the Koreans who lived there, and groups of vigilantes went around killing hundreds of Koreans. Even the police took part in those hunts. In the end…I suppose human beings will always look at those who are different and blame them for their problems.”

Then she looked at me. “Young man, thank you for telling me the truth.”

“It’s nothing.”

She clapped her hands together, the sound creating a shock and dispelling the heavy mood in the air.

“Well, the end of the world is the end of the world! There is nothing we can do about it. I have a karaoke machine in the backroom. Let’s sing the night away!”

Sayaka and I stared at her. She might’ve been over a hundred years old, but she had more energy than we did.

“*Yosh*! Let’s sing all night long!” Sayaka raised a fist.

“Uh, y-yeah.”

When I was a salaryman, I always avoided going to karaoke with my colleagues because I was terrible at singing. Actually, it might be more accurate to say that I was completely tone deaf. Usually I avoided the karaoke after parties by sticking with the group that went to another bar, but this time there was no escape.

Granny pulled out her karaoke machine. It was an ancient piece of equipment that looked like it came from the Showa era. Considering the age of the ryokan, it probably was from the Showa era.

Despite the age, it was well maintained and was in perfect working order.

“Our neighbors are all dead, so we don’t have to worry about disturbing anyone!” She turned up the volume and took out a large bottle of sake.

Whoa, she sure knew how to party despite her age.

“*Ohhh*! Let’s drink!” Sayaka cheered.

“Hey, you’re not of age yet.”

“It’s fine, isn’t it?” she pouted.

“Just let her try it out,” Granny said and poured Sayaka a cup.

Sayaka took the sake cup and drank all of it in one go before I could tell her to take it slow. She spat out nearly all of it and spent a long time coughing.

“I-It tastes like fire,” she wheezed.

“That’s sake for you,” I said.

Granny laughed.

“Granny! You didn’t warn me!”

“Greater lessons are learned when you experience the pain. I started drinking sake when I was just fourteen.”

““Ehhh?”” Sayaka and I exclaimed at the same time.

“Ah, you see…”

In between songs, Granny told us about her youth and the things she had to do to survive.

After her mother died, she was left with nothing, left Tokyo, and returned to Osaka. With the help of some relatives, she ended up working in a nightclub even though she was underage. She stole some money and ran away, this time to Kyoto. She ended up working at a ryokan, learned the trade, married, had children, and eventually ended up managing the ryokan she worked at when the owner had no heir.

Her life was hard and there wasn’t a moment of rest, but she survived when everyone else bit the dust. She even survived the pandemic when her husband and family and staff died. She was the last woman standing in every sense of the word.

“Do you think us survivors are immune, or we’re just lucky that we haven’t caught the virus?” I asked between songs.

She smiled wryly and said, “It doesn’t matter. Those who survive must continue on, no matter what. Whether it is pain or joy, laughter or tears, good times or bad times — those are all things we have to endure.”

The next song that came up was an old one neither of us recognized.

“Oh, it’s been a while since this one came up,” Granny said and rose from her seat.

The lyrics were old fashioned and frankly I didn’t really understand this type of music, but Granny sang with real feeling.

“I had to learn how to sing when I was working at a hostess club,” she said afterwards. “But youngsters these days don’t listen to this type of music anymore.”

“No, no. It was a beautiful performance.”

“Oh-ho, getting praised by a handsome young man like you is making me blush.”

Sayaka frowned and pouted. She grabbed the microphone. “My turn,” she declared.

We sang into the night. I had no idea when we went to sleep.

Well, it’s not like we have to get up early. All the offices and schools were closed and would remain closed forever.

[Autumn]

Chapter 18

The next morning, I woke up and checked my watch.

“Whoa, it’s already noon.”

I initially planned on exploring the Nara and Kyoto area a little before starting our preparations for the journey to Kyushu, but we had already slept away half of the day. Without electricity, we were forced to rely on the sun, and there were only about four or five hours of daylight left.

I guess it won’t hurt to rest today and begin preparations tomorrow.

“Hnghh…”

“Huh?”

I noticed there was someone next to me.

—?!

How did Sayaka end up in my futon?! Was she the type who moves around a lot when she is asleep?

When we were in Tokyo, I slept on a bed, so I suppose I never noticed.

She frowned when the sunlight hit her face. She sighed and rubbed her eyes.

“Is it morning already?”

“It’s noon.”

“Oh — “ She stopped and sat up. “It’s so late — oh wait, there is nothing to do.”

“We still have to go down to Kyushu, but we can worry about that tomorrow. It’s not like delaying our departure by one day will make a big difference.”

“Mh, you’re right.”

Sayaka’s stomach grumbled. Her face flushed slightly.

“Let’s go get some breakfast,” I suggested.

“Y-Yeah.”

She got out of the futon and noticed that we were on the same one.

“Huhn? How did I end up here?”

“Who knows…”

We went downstairs and saw that all of the lights had been turned off. The building felt eerily quiet.

“Did the generator fail?” Sayaka asked.

I went into one of the rooms and flipped a switch. The lights turned on.

“The power still works,” I said.

“Where is Granny? It might be better to ask for her permission before we use her kitchen to make breakfast.”

“Yeah.”

We walked around the building looking for her, but since neither of us knew her name, we just called out *Granny*.

Eventually we found her sleeping in a small room on the ground floor.

“Granny, can we use your kitchen? What would you like for breakfast?” Sayaka asked.

She didn’t wake up. Her body was unnaturally still.

“Granny?”

I touched her shoulder and shook her lightly.

Nothing.

I touched her hand. It was cold. She wasn’t breathing.

“She’s dead,” I said.

Sayaka took short sharp breaths.

“N-No way, but she was full of energy last night. H-How is that possible…?”

For a while I said nothing. Her expression was one of utter peace. There was even the slightest hint of a smile at the corner of her lips, or maybe I was just imagining it.

“She said her husband and children all succumbed to the virus. She must’ve felt incredibly lonely. Based on how she spoke last night, I think she took a lot of pride in her work. It must’ve hurt a lot when the pandemic caused all of her guests to cancel their bookings. I wonder…maybe…she wanted to stay alive a little longer to operate the ryokan for one last guest. Maybe it was her pride that kept her going.”

Did she see us and decide that the next generation will be fine? Maybe she thought, “*This is good enough, the young ones will be alright, I can pass on now.*”

Sayaka sank to her knees.

“T-Then it’s our fault? If we hadn’t shown up, she would still be alive?”

“No, you misunderstand. I think she was waiting for a pair like us to show up. That way, she would be able to pass on without regrets.”

I pulled the blanket over her face. “After last night, she must have decided that this is enough and it is time to pass on.”

“Can people even decide when to die?”

“I don’t know. But I’d like to think that was the case for her.”

Tears began to flow down Sayaka’s cheeks. I handed her a tissue. I patted her head.

“Don’t cry, she died without regrets, and — “

I didn’t add the other thing I wanted to say.

She has endured long enough. She’s been through so much. Passing on might be a blessing.

Like she said last night, it is the living who are left behind and must endure whatever comes, be it pain or joy, laughter or tears.

“And what?” Sayaka asked.

“It’s nothing. Let’s give her a proper burial.”

We found the vegetable garden she mentioned yesterday and took turns digging a rectangular hole, about three feet deep. Then we wrapped her up in a white blanket and gently lowered her into the grave.

“She never told us her name,” Sayaka said.

“Ryokan staff almost never share their names with the guests,” I said. “I guess she wanted to stay professional until the very end.”

“She must have been really lonely.”

“Yeah.”

I recalled everything she had to endure since she was a child. How she lost her parents and siblings, how she had to fend for herself through the decades. And in the end, life took away what little happiness she was able to find. In less than a year, the things she spent her whole life working for were taken away from her.

I gritted my teeth and balled my hands into fists.

“How unfair,” I said, my voice shaking with anger.

Why did I feel so angry for a person whose name I didn’t even know? Why did I feel angry when everyone else died equally meaningless and unfair deaths?

I don’t know. But a violent fury burned in my chest.

Angry tears flowed down my cheeks.

She didn’t deserve to see her husband and children die like this. She didn’t deserve to spend the end of her life alone with no one by her side.

“Yamada-san?” I felt Sayaka’s hand on my arm. “Are you okay?”

I blinked. She was looking at me with concerned eyes.

“Heh…”

A JK wearing her seifuku sailor uniform. Who thought I’d feel this much comfort from having her by my side. A sense of relief pulsed in my chest.

I put my arms around her shoulder and pulled her close.

“Y-Yamada-san?”

“Sorry, please just let me stay like this for a moment.”

“O-Okay.”

The weight of her head on my chest felt comforting.

“Wouldn’t it be better to cremate her body and bury the ashes?” Sayaka asked.

“I suppose, but we’d need a furnace for that.”

“Hmm…”

“In the past, the people always buried their dead like this, so it should be fine.”

I thought about all the dead bodies in Tokyo, Nara, Kyoto, and all over Japan. All of these people who lived in their rooms, isolated, only appearing outside when it was time to go to work, almost never having time for friends or family. The futon or the office. In the cities, people rarely talked to each other and everyone was too busy to meet with their friends. Since all of your needs are met by what shops provided, there was no need to interact with other people. Any occasion of having to talk to others became a bother.

That was the life most people lived in big cities.

None of them would ever get a proper burial. They’d rot in their homes, unknown and uncared for, as alone in death as they were in life.

I put both of my arms around Sayaka and held her close. Not in a way that suggested any lustful desire. It was a simple hug.

This time Sayaka said nothing.

If it wasn't for the end of the world, I would've never talked to Sayaka or Granny. It was the need for survival that brought us together, and even though the situation was tough, I didn't feel lonely for even a single moment.

If I met Sayaka before the world ended, we would've never talked to each other. We probably wouldn't have even noticed each other. Even if we did cross paths, we'd pass by each other, completely unaware of the bonds that could form, if only the world ended.

I suppose in the cities, your every need is met, so there is no need to seek each other out. Talking to a stranger requires an excuse, and if every need is already met, then you will simply never form bonds with others. Because there is just no need to. That is how loneliness starts, I suppose.

After a while, we clapped our hands together and said a final prayer. We knew her for less than a day and never even learned her name, but in these strange times, we shared important memories.

Sayaka and I each grabbed a shovel and buried her.

By the time we were done, it was already dark. We picked up a few vegetables from the garden and made a simple dinner of stir fried vegetables, left over rice and miso soup.

The kitchen was a professional one, with large smooth steel surfaces and all sorts of cooking tools.

"I don't know how to use half of these things," Sayaka said when she examined the shelves.

Afterwards, we washed the dishes and took a bath (separately this time). Then we went to sleep.

That night, a full moon shone, our room covered in subtle silver light. I could see the outline of Sayaka's body in her futon in the darkness.

"Yamada-san, are you asleep?"

"No."

"Where are we going next?"

"Kyushu, probably."

"Where in Kyushu?"

"Is there anywhere in the south you want to go to?"

"I've always wanted to visit Kumamoto and Kagoshima."

"I think Kagoshima is as far south as we can go in Kyushu."

"Oh, what's south of Kagoshima?"

"Nothing, just miles of ocean until we reach Okinawa." I tried to recall the maps I studied over the past couple of months. "Beyond that is Shanghai, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. And even further beyond that is Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore."

“I had a classmate in middle school who went to Singapore during her summer holidays.”

“Huh, you don’t say.”

“Her mother was from Singapore, so that’s why they always spent school holidays there. She’d score a perfect mark in English every single time. Sometimes she’d even correct the teacher.”

“They speak English in Singapore?”

“I think so.”

“Huh.”

Just then I thought that it would be nice if I could simply look up an article about Singapore.

“I had colleagues who got transferred to the Singapore branch of our company.”

“Oh, how did they find it?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t keep in touch with them. Most white collar workers don’t keep in touch after they go their separate ways. Our relationship starts and ends at the office door.”

“Oh… I guess I kind of understand that. I lost touch with my classmate after she moved to Singapore with her mother after her father cheated on her mother.”

“Huh.”

“Apparently, her father didn’t consider going to soaplands to be cheating and he had been doing that for years and never mentioned it to his wife. Then one day, he was seen by someone who is part of the parent-teacher committee, and she told my mother. That’s how she found out.”

“How do you know all that?”

“Everyone was talking about it at school. I think it might be also why my friend decided to leave the school. She was humiliated by what happened to her family.”

“I see…”

Junior high. I didn’t remember much about my own time in middle school. The only spectacular thing that happened to me in middle school was when I got my first girlfriend during that time. At that age, the most we did was kiss and hug each other. We broke up after we went to different high schools.

“What are you thinking about Yamada-san?”

“Huh?”

“You look like you’re thinking about something.”

“It’s nothing.”

I was thankful that the moonlight didn’t allow Sayaka to see my full expression.

“Hmm…I’ve never been to Okinawa. Come to think of it, I’ve never been to most places in Japan.”

“Me too. I’ve always wanted to go skiing in Hakuba or see the snow festival in Sapporo.”

“We can still go skiing in the winter, but you’ll have to climb up the mountain since no one can operate the lift.” Sayaka cackled with laughter.

“No, thanks. Climbing up a mountain for an hour just to ski for five minutes isn’t worth the effort.”

“Heee~”

“Is there anything special about Kagoshima?” I asked.

“I heard they have radishes as big as car tires on Sakurajima.”

“Really?”

“Mh-hmm! I saw it in a UTube video once; the farmers there grow them as large as a car’s wheel. They say the volcanic ash there makes the soil super nutritious or something like that.”

“If we find some of those radishes, we can keep them outside in the cold and eat them whenever we need to. Isn’t Kagoshima pork famous too?”

“Is it? I’ve never heard of it,” Sayaka said after thinking for a moment.

“If we see farm pigs walking around in Kagoshima, then we could hunt them and eat some meat.”

“Have you ever been hunting before?” Sayaka asked.

“Nope.”

“I think it might be difficult. Killing an animal…it isn’t something I can imagine myself doing.”

“You might have a point.”

I imagined killing a wandering pig. Pulling the trigger might be difficult and then taking apart the body and pulling out all the organs would probably cause me to lose all appetite.

In the end, I was still a white collar worker who was used to seeing meat packaged neatly and cleanly in supermarkets, preferably with a discount sticker on it.

Sayaka and I chatted a little more and then fell asleep.

The next morning, preparations for our journey down south began in earnest. Both of us still felt affected by Granny’s death, but it was autumn, and the weather was already more chilly than it was a few days ago.

According to Granny, winter in the Kansai region was still extremely cold, and since the generator was ancient and there were no spare parts available for repairs, we had no choice but to go further down south.

It would’ve been nice to spend the winter at a warm ryokan, oh well…

We drove around Nara and Kyoto, collecting as much canned food as we could. We also stocked up on batteries and petrol. Since we had done this before in Tokyo and had the experience of traveling all the way to Kansai, this time the process of collecting supplies was a lot more efficient.

We also broke into an auto repair shop and took several spare tires, just in case we were attacked by a bear again.

“What about tigers?” Sayaka asked.

“What are you talking about?”

“I heard that a long time ago, wild tigers roamed across Japan. They have become extinct since then, but there are stories of extinct species reemerging once humans disappear from a place.”

“You are thinking of Chinese tigers.”

“What about the ones in zoos?”

“Those are stuck in cages and will have died of starvation a year ago.”

“Oh…,” Sayaka sounded and her expression became subdued. “I never thought of it until now, but the animals in zoos have starved to death, right? And the cats and dogs people keep as pets in their apartments can’t unlock doors either.”

I thought about that moment for a moment.

“They probably ate their owners and then starved to death like the zoo tigers.”

“That kind of thing…”

Sayaka’s face turned pale.

“Oh, don’t worry, their owners died from the virus beforehand, so it’s not like they were eaten alive.”

“Geez, Yamada-san, how can you say that so casually?”

I guess my words did sound a little harsh, but it was just the truth. Pets are only cute and fluffy because we keep them fed and warm. As soon we stop, their survival instinct kicks in.

“Uhm..sorry.”

“Geez…”

Afterwards, we spent two days taking in the sights of Kyoto and Nara. We allocated one day for each.

The wild deer of Nara had indeed retreated into the mountains and we only found a few grazing near the temples. Amazingly, the wooden temples hadn’t fallen apart; despite the lack of human care, these structures remained standing.

Two days later, we loaded up our supplies and Granny’s power generator, and left.

“Let’s go,” I said and closed the car door.

“Mh-hmm.”

We drove down the countryside road, headed towards Kyushu. The road was covered in bright crimson leaves, so much so that the black asphalt wasn’t even visible anymore. Our car left a whirl of leaves behind as we drove down the red road. In the distance, we could see Kyoto, slowly being swallowed up by nature.

I wonder what we would find in Kyushu.

[Winter]

Chapter 19

“It’s so unfair that it suddenly started raining — *nee,* senpai?”

On our way home, rain began to fall even though the weather report this morning said it would be clear all week long. Neither of us had an umbrella, so we had no choice but to hide at the bus shelter at the side of the road.

It was the kind of lonely bus shelter on a lonely road in the middle of the countryside where the sign was so faded that the schedule wasn’t even legible anymore.

The rain gently drummed down on the metal roof above us. Both of us were more or less soaked already, but luckily my shoes were still dry. Since it was summer, I didn’t feel cold at all. If we got soaked like this during a different season, then we would’ve definitely caught a cold.

Somehow this bus shelter felt familiar, like I’ve seen it somewhere else before.

“It can’t be helped,” I said.

I glanced at Sayaka. Her long black hair was dripping water at its ends.

Sayaka let out a long sign.

“I wanted to finish my homework early too so that I could watch the special program tonight,” she said.

“Don’t lie. You planned on getting me to help you do it tomorrow morning before classes start.”

“How do you know that?”

“You do that every time there is something on TV you want to watch.”

“Heee~ You figured it out.”

“You can just watch it on UTube after the broadcast is done, you know?”

Sayaka looked at me oddly.

“What’s UTube, senpai?”

“Huh? It’s an app where you watch videos. Are you stupid? You can just load up the app on your phone. Here — “

I pulled out my phone and —

“Huh?”

I held a flip phone in my hand. It was silver and when I flipped it open, it revealed a tiny display with a keypad underneath it.

Wait a minute. Where did my smartphone go?

“What’s an *app*?” Sayaka asked.

“It’s — never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

It’d be too troublesome to explain the concept of a smartphone and apps and the Internet to someone who has never heard of it.

“I hope the rain lets up soon,” Sayaka said.

I glanced at my watch. It was a cheap Casio watch I bought with — with what money again? Oh right, my allowance. What a strange word. It felt like I hadn’t used the word *allowance* in a long time.

“It’s not even five yet, you’ll make it.”

“I sure hope so.”

My watch said it was the year 2003. Huh…2003. Yeah, that’s right. It’s 2003.

I opened my school bag and found an iPod and a pair of Sony headphones. I had to work part-time at a convenience store to buy those. An iPod sure is a luxury for a high school student.

It’s a shame this thing doesn’t have 5G. Otherwise, I could stream some music rather than having to connect it to my desktop computer.

Huh… I can’t stream in 2003. That much is obvious. But in what era can I stream music? It feels like I’m missing something.

“Scrolling through my playlist using the iPod wheel feels so slow,” I said.

“Eh? Really? But tapping the buttons on your phone is even slower, right? It would take ages to get to the song you want.”

“I sure miss touchscreens.”

Sayaka tilted her head slightly. “What’s a touchscreen?”

“You know, a screen you can touch. Like if you press it, it will recognize your touch and scroll down the list.”

She raised a dubious eyebrow. “Senpai, have you been reading those science fiction books again? You’re getting reality and fiction mixed up.”

“No, I swear. In ten years from now, everyone is going to be using a touchscreen device! In fact, people will stop reading books on the train and just play games on their phones. And instead of talking to each other, most people will just send each other messages. Actually most people will spend most of their day playing with their phones.”

“You’ve definitely been reading too much weird stuff,” she said. “That sounds like a horrible future.”

“Eh…I suppose so.”

Something didn’t feel quite right. I was sure that I was accurately predicting the future, but at the same time there was no evidence to back it up. I just *knew* that I was right.

“Anyway, once we’re home, trade with me so that I can evolve my Haunter,” she said and pulled her Game Boy out of her bag.

“Get someone else to help you. I don’t have time to play games anymore.”

“Ehhh, you’re so mean, senpai.”

I glanced left and right. Where was I?

Right, I just finished classes for the day. I’m on my way home with my kohai, Sayaka. Where are we? Right, we’re in Niigata. Somehow I instinctively knew this. But I grew up in Tokyo.

Why was I here? It didn’t really make sense.

Actually…didn’t I already finish high school? I’m supposed to be a working adult…until…until what? Something happened to the world, but what?

For a moment, I felt a sense of panic. And then — nothing.

Well, it doesn’t really matter anyway.

One thing I really didn’t understand was why I was standing here with Sayaka. There was no Sayaka in my class when I was in high school. And yet, when I look at her, I get the sense that I knew her really well. Almost like a childhood friend. And the way she looked at me carried a sense of familiarity.

“*Nee,* senpai.”

“Yeah?”

“There is no one around.”

“Oh.”

Her hand touched mine. Our fingers intertwined.

Oh, right. We’re going out. Somehow I just accepted that like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

She confessed to me with a letter she slipped into my shoe locker on Valentine's Day, and I gave her my answer a month later on White Day. Ever since then, we’ve been going out, but for one reason or another, we’ve kept it a secret…because…because of what reason? I couldn’t remember.

Sayaka leaned against me.

“Sayaka?”

“There’s no one here, it’s just us two. It’s alright, isn’t it?”

“Well…I suppose so.”

My skin felt hot. I was acutely aware of every inch of my body that was making contact with her.

Her sweet scent mixed with the smell of rain.

I put my arms around her and held her close. Sayaka wiggled in my arms and squirmed.

“Geez, it’s poking into me.”

“Sorry.” I shifted my position a little. “Is that better?”

“Yeah.”

She put her arms around my waist, and we held each other like that for a while.

I rested my nose on her head. The scent of rain clung to her hair.

“That tickles.” Sayaka squirmed in my arms, but she didn’t move away. “*Nee*, senpai, let’s go on a date sometime.”

“Sure, how about this Sunday?”

“My parents aren’t home this Sunday.”

“Oh.”

I maintained a calm expression, but in reality my heart was pounding in my chest. What if Sayaka could hear it? She’d probably tease me about it.

She looked up at me, her face filling my vision.

Huh… I felt that she is an important part of my life, but I’m not supposed to meet her until much later. What a strange feeling… Well, it doesn’t matter. I was alone with a cute girl under a bus shelter, the heavy rain separating us from the rest of the world.

“Sayaka…”

Her lips were slightly parted. Her eyes were closed, her small hands gripping my shirt.

I leaned down, ready to —

"Yamada-san, wake up, wake up!"

"Huh?"

Someone shook my shoulder. I opened my eyes and breathed in the cold winter air.

Ah, right. Now I remember. We were on our way to Kyushu, Kagoshima specifically. Our car ran out of fuel last night, and we were stranded in the middle of the mountains. It was too late to walk down the road to find a vehicle we could siphon petrol from, so we made camp in the middle of the road.

Using the knowledge we gained from camping books, we started a fire using the tree branches and leaves we found on the roadside. It wasn't much, but it kept us warm through the night. We set up a tent and took turns sleeping.

"You were supposed to keep watch," Sayaka said.

"Sorry, I fell asleep."

"Geez, what if a bear came to eat us?"

"We'd be dead regardless."

"Geez."

Sayaka took out the rest of the camping gear and made coffee using the campfire.

"Here." She handed me a cup.

"Thanks."

I stared at her face. Her hair was a little shorter in my dream, but there was no doubt that Sayaka and the girl in my dream were the same person.

We were about to kiss when she woke me up.

"Ugh…"

"Hmm? What is it, Yamada-san?"

In the dream, she called me *senpai*.

"I think you appeared in my dream while I was asleep," I said and immediately regretted it.

"Heee~ Did something happen in your dream?"

I should've just said, '*it's nothing*,' and moved on.

"Nothing happened."

"Are you sure…*senpai*?"

"Huh?" I blinked. I turned to her. I rubbed my eyes. Was this also a dream? No, Sayaka wore a thick winter coat and not the summer uniform that she wore in my dream. "How…how did you…"

Sayaka clapped her hands together and laughed.

"So I was right! You dreamt about being a student and me being your kohai."

“N-No, I mean, yeah, but nothing happened. It was a weird dream anyway.”

Sayaka leaned forward, her eyes smiling.

“Are you sure…senpai?”

“Please stop that.”

“Your precious kohai wants some answers.”

“Shut it, you’re not my precious kohai.”

“Heee…”

“Anyway, it was just a dream and nothing happened.”

“I guess we were about the same age in your dream, right? Since we were going to school together and all. Why would you dream that though?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just felt nostalgic about the past. A lot of other things appeared in my dream, like the iPod and those old Sony headphones.”

Sayaka tilted her head. “What’s an iPod?”

“It’s that thing that came out before the iPhone. It has a wheel that you could use to navigate the playlist.”

“A wheel?” Sayaka looked confused. She couldn’t even imagine how something without a touchscreen could work. “Can you show me the next time we break into a Bic Camera?”

“They stopped selling those years ago.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.”

We sat down in camping chairs and drank coffee. It was the kind of bland instant coffee I used to drink every day at the office, but somehow it was delicious.

Our tent, chairs and fire were placed in the middle of the mountain road. It felt a little strange to be blocking the road like this, but there was no other flat surface suitable for camping, and there was no one else driving on the road anyway.

“We are so close to Kagoshima, why did we have to run out of fuel right here,” Sayaka said with a sigh.

“It can’t be helped. The highways were suddenly packed with abandoned cars, so we can only take the mountain roads.”

The closer we got to Kagoshima, the more cars we saw on the road, until eventually there was a sudden mass of abandoned cars on the highway, blocking our route like a wall, forcing us to turn back and head into the mountains. Once we were on the mountain roads, it was easy to get lost, and there was no way of refueling.

“Do you think the people in this region streamed towards Kagoshima for the same reason people in Kanto went to Niigata?”

I nodded. “Kagoshima is a port town; a lot of people in this region probably thought they could take a ship and sail away from the pandemic.”

When we first arrived in the Kyushu region, we had to drive through several tunnels and there were plenty of abandoned cars. Some of them were empty and some had rotting corpses inside. If this were a zombie

apocalypse, the chances of Sayaka and I surviving would be zero. There were too many dead bodies scattered all over Japan.

Sayaka drank her coffee and then sneezed.

“Granny said winter down here is milder, but it still feels cold.” “You probably feel cold because you’re missing sleep. It’s also been ages since we had a proper meal.”

“Let’s find a Uniqlo and get more winter clothing.”

“Sure.”

“If it’s this cold here in Kyushu, then we’d be dead in Kansai and Kanto.”

“Yeah.”

The first winter without electricity made me realize how frightening nature actually was. Without electrical heating, our bodies were exposed to the cold. It became painfully clear just how fragile our bodies were.

Actually having to warm ourselves with a campfire, not because we wanted to experience the outdoors, but because our survival depended on it, meant that we had regressed back to the stone age, right?

How did the people in the past survive the winter? Did they really just huddle around a fire until spring arrived?

“We need to find some petrol before we can move on,” I said.

All the vehicles were jamming up the local highway. These mountain roads had been largely left alone, to our detriment.

I opened the trunk and got out some canisters.

“We’ll have to go on foot until we find an abandoned car.”

Sayaka and I each took two canisters along with a small pump and a rubber tube in a backpack. It was an efficient operation. We had done it several times before.

We walked down the mountain roads, surrounded by tall trees and cliff sides. If I was here on my own, I’d probably feel scared. The eerie silence seeps into you, making you acutely aware of how alone you are in this world.

Eventually, we came to a stop.

“Yamada-san, look.”

She pointed at something that looked like a Shinto gate. The color was bright red, like it had just been freshly repainted. Among the trees, it stood out like a large rock in the middle of the meadow, demanding your attention.

“There’s a temple in the middle of the mountains,” she said.

“The color doesn’t look faded at all,” I said.

When we passed by Fukuoka and Hiroshima, we saw some local temples and all of them had chipped paint or damaged roofs. Without humans performing maintenance, these temples quickly display wear and tear.

“Do you think someone is maintaining this place?” she asked.

I went up to the Shinto gate and touched it.

“I think so. The paint is dry, but someone has definitely been taking care of this.”

Past the Shinto gate, I could see a stone staircase leading deeper into the forest. The staircase was perfectly clean, without even a hint of moss.

“We could ask them for fuel,” Sayaka suggested. “But that might be a risk.”

“Hmm…”

Not everyone who survived the end of the world might be willing to share what they have. On our journey, we’ve seen countless examples of battlefields, charred corpses, and the remains of bombed out cars.

“Let’s have a look,” Sayaka said and stepped forward. “Besides, I’ve been wanting to go to a Shinto shrine.”

“Huh? Why?”

“You’ll see.”

We went up the stairs and walked past several rows of stone lanterns and pagoda lanterns. We walked past a large Shinto gate and saw a large shrine in front of us. It was painted in red, and just like the gate at the roadside, it displayed no signs of wear and tear. It was as if the passage of time had no effect on it.

“Yamada-san, hold this please.”

She took off her coat and handed it to me.

“Sure, but aren’t you cold?”

She went up the shrine, tossed in some coins, clapped her hands together, and began to pray.

After she was done, I said, “I didn’t know you were religious.”

“I’m not, but I wanted to pray for Granny and everyone else who has died. It’s just too sad if all of their deaths occurred without anyone acknowledging them.”

“But why take off your coat?”

“I figured God might favor a JK, no?”

I patted her head on the head.

“Y-Yamada-san?”

“You’re a good kid.”

“What do you mean?” She looked up at me with upturned eyes, her cheeks slightly flushed.

“Praying for Granny and the others never even occurred to me.”

“Huh? Don’t you go to Shinto temples?”

“Not really. I used to go during the new year to pray for health and happiness like everyone else. But once I started working, I always slept in on new year’s and felt too tired to go later. Work would still be the same no didn’t matter how much I prayed, so I just didn’t see the point of it.”

“Heee, you sound like the typical disillusioned middle aged man.”

“I am a disillusioned middle aged man.”

“Heh-heh-heh~”

I looked around the temple. It wasn’t only the paint that was well maintained. The temple grounds were clean. Not a single leaf tarnished the ground. The benches appeared clean. Even the pond at the side was clear like a mirror.

“This place is definitely strange,” I said.

“Mh, it feels…it feels like it isn’t part of this world.”

Just then, we heard footsteps coming from the back of the temple.

Sayaka and I turned to each other.

“A survivor,” I whispered.

“Do you think it is whoever is taking care of this place?”

“Probably.”

The footsteps drew closer until —

“Hello.”

A man in simple grey robes and a shaved head greeted us. He looked like a normal monk, the kind you'd see at any temple.

He smiled and bowed to us.

“Pardon the intrusion,” Sayaka and I said at the same time and bowed.

“I am glad to see that there are more people who have survived the pandemic,” the monk said. His voice was calm and even, like an undisturbed lake.

“Are you the only one here?” I asked.

He smiled and nodded.

“I see, so you are the one who has been taking care of this place.”

“That’s right. Everyone else has departed, so it is my duty to take care of this temple. Otherwise, I would not be able to face my master when I too pass on. Although climbing the ladder to paint the gates is rather tough. I hope my master can forgive me for not doing that task too often.”

He laughed.

Sayaka and I looked at each other. We let out a silent sigh of relief. He seemed to be a normal person and didn’t mind that we spoke with a Tokyo accent.

“Keeping the entire temple in shape on your own must be tough,” Sayaka remarked.

“It is simply my duty. I wish I could pass on with the others, but I am the last one remaining, therefore it is my mission to wait here for those who wish to pray and move on.”

I looked at the monk and then at the temple. He has been toiling away on his own, even when the rest of the world has ended. I couldn’t help but admire this monk and his will of steel.

“This is really admirable,” I said, and I meant it.

“Cleaning the temple on my own is a lot of work. Sometimes I think I’ve been chosen as a survivor because I’ve always enjoyed working quietly on my own. Even after I became a monk, I was a bit of a loner,” he said with self-depreciating laughter.

Sayaka and I chuckled.

“I suppose it would be more accurate to say that I was left behind by mere chance. But that is alright. Our founder, Matsu-sama, has said that whoever remains must carry on his duty.”

Matsu-sama? That was probably the head priest of this temple or whoever first built this place.

“Anyway, you two must be famished. Please follow me. I shall prepare a meal.”

“Thank you for your generosity. We will take you up on this offer.”

We followed him to a dining hall behind the temple. He showed us to a table and then went to the kitchen.

The dining hall was quite cold. This place probably didn’t have any electricity for heating.

The monk came back after a short while.

“I’m sorry it took so long. All cooking has to be done the old way, with fire and hearth.”

He placed a simple stew, two bowls of rice, and some side dishes on the table.

“You can prepare all of this with just a hearth? Most people wouldn’t know how to cook without a modern kitchen,” I said.

“Our founder Matsu-sama insisted in his teachings that we must all know how to cook without modern inventions. We must be able to live with what nature has provided us. Fire and stone.”

“Fire and stone…” Sayaka repeated.

I felt Sayaka pinch my thigh. I glanced at her, but I couldn't discern any kind of obvious emotion on her face. Was she trying to tell me something?

"Please, enjoy your meal. And don't worry about asking for seconds. There is plenty more."

"In that case, thank you for the food," I said and picked up the chopsticks.

"Thank you for the food," Sayaka said, her voice quiet.

The meal was incredibly simple. There was no meat, but there was something refreshing about the taste. It was difficult to describe, but eating the food made my body feel light.

"Actually there is something I would like to ask, if you don't mind," the monk said.

"What would you like to know?"

"I am bound by duty to maintain this temple as a portal. For those who seek salvation, I am here. For that reason, I am unable to venture beyond the temple grounds. Could you please tell me what exactly happened to the outside world? I've heard bits and pieces from people who have passed by, but no one seems to know everything."

"We don't know everything either, but I can tell you what we know."

"Please do."

I told the monk about everything that happened in Tokyo, the rumors about how the virus was imported from abroad, and what happened on our way here. I skipped some details like the Granny we met in Nara and focused on the things we saw in the different towns we passed through.

After I finished speaking, the monk didn't say anything for a while.

"I see…it is truly a terrible thing that has befallen on this world. I suppose Matsu-sama was right…"

Sayaka tugged my sleeve.

"Yamada-san, about the petrol…"

"Oh right!" I said. "If you don't mind me asking, do you have any petrol? Our car ran out in the middle of our journey…"

"Hmm, I think I do have some in the shed. But the days are shorter now and the sun will soon set. How about you two spend the night here?"

"S-Sure — ouch!"

Sayaka pinched my thigh again.

I gave her a look that said, '*what?!*'

She scowled at me but said nothing.

"I can heat up the communal bath, I'm sure your muscles must be sore from walking all day long."

"A communal bath?" I asked.

"Ohhhh!" Sayaka's eyes shone. Her expression suddenly changed when she heard that.

"It is not as luxurious as an onsen. It's about the same as a public bath. I hope you don't mind."

"O-Of course not! Thank you very much!"

After finishing our meal, we took a long hot bath. It was the first bath I had taken since we left Nara. How long has it been since then? Three weeks? Maybe longer.

By the time Sayaka and I finished bathing, the sun had set, and it was pitch black. Without a source of light, you wouldn't be able to see two steps in front of you.

The monk provided us with lanterns and guided us to a cottage next to the temple.

"This is a guest cottage we provide to guests who choose to stay," he said. "Please make yourself comfortable. There is a set of hot coals in the middle of the room. Please be careful."

I stepped inside, but Sayaka didn't move.

"Uhm…about the petrol…" Sayaka sounded.

The monk continued to smile serenely.

"Please rest assured. I will go through the temple's supply shed and see what I can find."

"Okay…"

Sayaka didn't sound convinced, but she stepped into the cottage anyway. The monk closed the door and walked away.

Once his footsteps faded away, Sayaka turned to me and punched my chest several times.

"Ouch! What did I do?!"

"Yamada-san! You idiot! Moron! Brainless idiotic moron! Pervert! Leech!"

"What did I do?! You can't accuse me of ogling other girls because the world has ended and there are no other girls left."

Sayaka's ears grew red, and she punched me even harder.

"Didn't you get the hint that I wanted to leave?"

"What? You wanted to leave the entire time?!"

"And when I tried to pull you to the side, you were totally just staring at the monk and didn't even pay attention to me. It's like you've been brainwashed by his cult!"

"No way, I'm not being brainwashed. I just thought it was admirable of him to take care of the temple on his own even though the world has ended. I thought this devotion to the mission his master gave him was touching."

"There! You got that weird look in your eyes! You're being brainwashed."

She chopped me on the head with all of her strength.

"Ouch! You're going to crack my skull! Do I need to remind you that your eyes glittered like stars when he mentioned that he has a large communal bath? I've never seen a person's eyes literally glitter like that."

Sayaka pouted and gave me the cold shoulder.

"I'm a girl, you know. Girls need baths. You men can just slum it in the trenches and smell like pigs and don't even mind."

"That's not true — actually…well yeah, I guess that is kind of true. But I'm different. I like baths and keeping clean."

We looked at each other, both of us breathing deeply. Come to think of it, this was the first time we've had a real argument.

Wait, why are we fighting again?

"Wait, why are you so angry?" I asked.

Sayaka glanced at me, her expression sullen. She took a breath and then turned to face me, this time looking serious.

"Do you remember how you said this place felt weird because it's so well maintained even though the world has ended?"

"Yeah, but it's because that monk kept up the good work, so…"

"I thought it was weird too, but what struck me as even stranger is that the monk said he was tied to this place because the founder Matsu-sama said it was his duty, right?"

"Right, yeah, I think he did mention someone by that name. It must be the head monk or something like that."

"Doesn't that strike you as odd? Yamada-san, this is the end of the world. No matter how devoted you are, when all of your fellow monks have died from the disease, wouldn't it be natural to go outside? Not even the most devoted monk would refuse to go outside to see what's going on."

"What are you trying to say?"

"And he never said that everyone else has died. Do you remember the exact words he said? He said, '*they departed,*' and he refers to this temple as a '*portal*'. And no matter how much you value tradition, you would use a modern kitchen rather than a hearth for cooking, right?"

"I guess the words he used are a bit odd, but that's just religion, right? Maybe some people like the old ways and want to have nothing to do with modern technology."

Sayaka sighed and shook her head.

"You're wrong. Even monks used smartphones to talk to others before the world ended." Her expression darkened. "This level of isolationism is like a cult."

"Uhh…" I wasn't convinced. "Maybe you just don't like the monk?"

"You — !"

She looked like she was going to hit me again; instead, she reached into her bag and pulled out a paperback book. She threw it at my face.

"This is one of the books I took with me from Tokyo. Remember? We talked about it before. Turn to page fifty."

I decided to say nothing about my throbbing nose and listened to her instructions.

"The light is a bit dark, can you just summarize it?"

Sayaka let out an audible breath through her nose. She really seemed to be on edge.

"Page fifty talks about how in recent years, small cults with a single founder at the core have been popping up all over Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. At the bottom of the page it talks about Kyushu and it mentions a cult founder by the name of

Matsu-sama. He is one of those guys who says the world is impure, and the Japanese spirit has been infected by the consumerist world, and therefore he and his followers decided to live in the mountains, away from the cities and without modern technology. He also predicted the end of the world and got his followers to give up all of their property and money."

I narrowed my eyes and tried to read the page.

"Are you saying that the Matsu-sama the monk mentioned isn't a head monk but a cult founder?"

"That's right."

"That's a bit of a stretch, isn't it?"

"Idiot! Don't you get it? The monk being part of the Matsu-sama cult would explain everything! His strange devotion, his lack of knowledge about the outside world, the strange words he uses whenever he talks about Matsu-sama, and — " She paused for a moment. " — that creepy smile, like he is living under some kind of spell."

I let out a breath.

"I suppose you might have a point…but we can't leave now. It's too dark; we won't be able to find our way back."

"Please, Yamada-san, let's leave now. Let's just go. We just have to stick to the road, right?"

"I don't think that's a good idea. What if we fall off a cliff? Or wild animals attack us?"

"But…" Sayaka averted her gaze.

"It's safe in this cottage. Don't worry. We will leave at first light, okay?"

"Do you promise? We leave at daybreak and not a moment later."

"I promise."

That seemed to calm her down. Seriously, she's read too many books about cults.

"Let's try to get some sleep," I said.

I lay down on the futon and closed my eyes. For some reason, I couldn't relax. Was it because this was my first time sleeping at a temple?

"Yamada-san, you can't sleep, right?"

"Yeah."

"Me too. There's something unnerving about being in this cottage."

I got up and let out a sharp breath.

"I'm going to have a smoke."

I tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge.

"Hmm? Is it stuck?"

I tried to pull it open, but it wouldn't move. My chest suddenly felt cold. What was going on? Did the monk lock us inside? But why would he do that?

No, the door was probably stuck. A lot of these old doors have rusty parts and that's why…

"Yamada-san," Sayaka said, her face pale. Her worst fears had come true.

“Don’t worry, the door is just stuck.”

At least that’s what I wanted to believe.

I hammered on the door and called out to the monk. In the absolute silence of the night, my voice should travel far enough for him to hear.

“Hello?! Can you hear me? Hello? The door is stuck!”

After a while, I heard footsteps. It was definitely the monk. His footsteps sounded slow and patient, like there was nothing to worry about.

“I’m sorry to bother you at night, but it seems that the door is stuck,” I said.

A slot in the door opened. It was a lot like those doors in prison; a narrow slit through which the prison guard could check what the inmate was doing.

Actually it was exactly like one of those doors. Except it was made out of wood and not metal.

Huh? How did I not notice that before? I was probably too drawn in by the monk’s smile and felt too much at ease to notice such details.

The monk looked at us through this slot. His smile was calm and serene.

“I’m very sorry that I have to lock you two in,” he said. “Matsu-sama will see you tomorrow. It is forbidden for those who enter the temple to leave before that.”

My heart sank.

“Didn’t you say that this Matsu-sama is dead?”

“Our founder is not dead; he has passed on with everyone else. I am simply here to help those who will follow him to the other side. That is my duty.”

Stay calm. There’s got to be a way out of this.

“We have no interest in meeting your founder. Please let us out. We need to travel to Kagoshima.”

The monk’s lips made an ‘O’ shape, and he put a finger to his chin.

“Hmm, that is a little difficult. You see, Matsu-sama said that after he has summoned the pandemic, anyone who enters the temple must pass on. That is the only way for humanity to attain salvation.” Through the slot, he looked at me with smiling eyes. “I understand that you two want to go to Kagoshima, but there is nothing in this world worth living for, right? It is better to pass on. There is no need to torture yourself with life anymore. Please understand that it is my duty to enforce the teachings of Matsu-sama and help you gain salvation.”

A chill traveled down my spine. His gaze did not waver. He was entirely convinced that he was right.

So this was a cult member. It was as if he was in an entirely different world. It felt like we did not even share the same common sense anymore.

I saw some videos about cults on UTube. There were plenty of them all over Japan, but they did not try to spread their beliefs in the big cities. Usually it was overworked white collar workers who sought them out on the Internet, but most people just continued to work their jobs and live their lives.

This is the first time I have come face to face with someone like that.

“Humanity cannot stay in this world anymore. We must all pass on to the other side, and I am here to help you do that. Most people are afraid to pass on; that is why the virus is a blessing Matsu-sama has bestowed upon this world. It takes the choice away from us, and all we have to do is give in. It is truly wonderful.”

“No, your founder has nothing to do with the virus. He’s just using this as an excuse. If he really is the almighty founder, wouldn’t he have survived and remained in this world to help other people pass on?”

His smile didn’t change. It didn’t even waver.

“Matsu-sama must guide the majority of humanity in the next world. There aren’t many people remaining here, so therefore it is the duty of a lowly follower like me to keep this portal to the next world open.”

For a moment, I didn’t even know what to say in return. His expression frightened me to the core.

“You are completely brainwashed. You’re crazy! Let us out!”

I hammered against the door.

The monk looked at me and for the first time his expression changed. He let out a disappointed sigh, as if he pitied me.

“Matsu-sama saw the state the world was in. Humanity was running towards a cliff and no one was able to stop it. We were consumed by greed, our sole focus in life had become the accumulation of money. Even the holy union of marriage has become contaminated by money, with people choosing each other based on the size of their bank account and their physical looks. Each day, people work themselves to the bone, trying to make more and more money, all without noticing that the world is hurtling towards a disastrous end. Humanity was working itself to death and taking the planet with it. By summoning this virus, Matsu-sama has both saved this planet and given humanity salvation.”

He placed a hand on his chest. “Everyone’s hearts have been polluted by greed. We have to start over in the next world where our spirits can be cleansed.”

“Then why don’t you just kill yourself and go join Matsu-sama.”

“I am the gatekeeper ready to dispatch anyone who comes this way. This is my duty.”

Ugh, my head hurt from listening to him. He’s been saying that over and over again.

Although I have to admit that there was something seductive about his words. There were some parts I agreed with, and I could see how people from the city could be seduced by this kind of rhetoric.

But that serene look in his eyes gave me the creeps.

Behind me, Sayaka got up.

“Yamada-san, move aside.”

“Huh?”

Her hand grabbed my shirt and pulled me aside. Her other arm shot past me, a gun in her hand. She shoved the muzzle through the slot in the door. The cold metal touched the monk's forehead.

Without saying a single word, she pulled the trigger. The sound was so loud that my ears were ringing for a few moments afterwards.

Sayaka fell to her knees and threw up. Her whole body was shaking.

This girl…

I read somewhere that most soldiers felt nauseous after killing another human being for the first time. They said it was like ripping your own heart out.

"Sayaka…"

Her shoulders were so small.

She survived the winter on her own before she met me in Tokyo.

She pulled the gun on me when we first met.

She didn't hesitate to drive a truck through the metal shutters when I had given up.

She stepped on the pedal when her classmates encircled us.

This girl…

She might look like a regular JK, but her survival instincts were incredibly strong. She never hesitated when she had to make hard choices.

I helped her get up and moved her to the futon. She was breathing heavily, and soon she fell asleep.

"Kuh…"

An overwhelming sense of shame washed over me. How pathetic could I be? I was the adult here and did nothing but scream at the monk, and in the end, it was Sayaka who saved us. It was me who should've shot him. It would've been easier for me to bear the burden of having killed someone.

But…if I held the gun, would I have been able to pull the trigger?

Deep down inside I knew I wouldn't have been able to do it. Even if the monk was about to kill us, I wouldn't be able to do it.

I gritted my teeth and punched the floor.

[Winter]

Chapter 20

In the morning, Sayaka woke up. Her face was pale and her hair disheveled, but we were both alive.

“Yamada-san, did you not sleep at all?”

I shook my head. “I just couldn’t relax.”

Sayaka got up and shot the door lock. We pushed the door open and saw the monk’s cold body slumped on the floor. A pool of blood had formed around his head.

“Don’t look,” I said and covered her eyes.

“Mh, thanks.”

We moved away from the body.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

Sayaka smiled weakly.

I suggested that we leave this temple right away, but Sayaka said that since we were already here, we should see if there is anything useful we could take with us. She was surprisingly calm despite what happened last night.

After looking around for a bit, we discovered a shed behind the temple. Inside we found a Range Rover and a Mercedes Benz.

“Heh…so much for having no worldly desires and no need for money. Their founder Matsu-sama sure liked imported foreign cars,” I said.

I used my crowbar to force the fuel cap cover open, and we siphoned the petrol out of both cars.

“Since he had luxury cars like this, the founder probably didn’t want to die,” I mused.

“A lot of cults are like this,” Sayaka said. “The founder uses his influence to get his hands on the money of his followers and sleeps with young women who want to be blessed by him. I heard that sometimes women even give him all of their money so that he may deposit his holy seed in their womb — or something like that.”

“Huh…”

I felt Sayaka’s eyes on me.

“Yamada-san.”

“Yeah?”

“What did you think about what the monk said last night?”

There was no use hiding it from her. I had a feeling she’d know if I was telling the truth or not.

“I agree with some of the things he said. Our greed was causing this world to go to hell. Actually I heard that the virus was caused by environmental destruction, so I suppose we brought this onto ourselves. Maybe you don’t know it, but most adults work blindly, and it is true that for

most of us, making more money has become a singular obsession. I suppose it is tempting to believe the words of a founder like Matsu-sama, but…”

“But?”

“I think simply listening to a guy who is offering you salvation is no different from running away. As adults, we have to keep living, and taking the easy way out isn’t right.” After a moment of thought, I said, “Maybe that is why so many people choose religion and cults. They offer easy solutions to the frustrations in life. It takes away the work of having to find our own answer, which is a very easy trap to fall into when you’re tired from work.”

“I see…”

“We each have to find our own answers. That is life.” I looked at Sayaka. “And in my case…well…”

“Hmm?” Sayaka tilted her head slightly.

“Well…in my case, I found you.”

For a moment, there was absolute silence. And then —

“W-W-What are you even saying?!”

“Hey! Don’t wave your gun around like that! It’s dangerous!”

Her face was red like the late afternoon sun.

Eventually I got her to calm down, and we carried the canisters back to our car. We refueled and then continued to drive on.

[Sayaka]

Killing someone never gets any easier. Even when the monk was threatening our lives, I hesitated to pull the trigger. It was only for a fraction of a moment, but I still hesitated.

I didn’t say much on our way to Kagoshima, and Yamada-san didn’t try to talk to me either. Was he shocked by what I did? From his point of view, he saw a JK in her school uniform pull the trigger with the intention to kill — and getting it done.

The image of the bullet hole in the monk’s head; the pool of blood seeping into the soil.

Just thinking about it made me want to throw up again, but it was impossible not to think about it.

The monk wasn’t the first person I killed. He wasn’t even the second person. Although he was the second person I killed in front of Yamada-san.

I had a sudden yearning to go back to the way life was before, to a time when I hadn’t killed all of these people.

Yamada-san took the wheel and I sat in the passenger seat. I drifted in and out of sleep and Yamada-san just let me rest like that. I thought about the dream that he had before — the dream where I called him senpai. What would it have been like if we met as classmates rather than at the end of the world? I think it might’ve been fun. It’s too bad I couldn’t continue the

dream on his behalf. After I wake up, I'd try my hardest to recall every detail of it and then I'd tell him all about it.

After two more days of driving, we arrived in Kagoshima. The city was silent, just like every other city we passed through. We drove down the main street, taking in the city.

"Sayaka, look."

In an attempt to make conversation, Yamada-san pointed at the tramways in the middle of the road. Overgrown grass swallowed the tracks, but the overhead electric cables made it obvious that trams once ran here.

Rows of old European style street lights lined up along the street. The pedestrian street was decorated with Western style archways.

This city didn't look Japanese at all. It didn't look like the European cities I had seen in pictures either. It was a strange combination of Japanese and European elements.

"Do you think the people here died just like in Tokyo?" I asked.

"Probably."

"I see — oh look!"

Up ahead I saw a tram car that was turned to its side. Its windows had been shattered and the metal had begun to rust.

"How does a tram end up like that?" I asked.

"Maybe a car rammed it," Yamada-san said. "There was probably a lot of chaos since people came to this city to find a ship."

"In that case, we should check the port area."

"Yeah."

We followed the rusted street signs and drove towards the ocean.

"Let's see…where is it…" Yamada-san murmured.

He leaned forwards as he tried to guess which way to go. His expression was really focused as he did that and he'd narrow his eyes. I couldn't help but smile a little. I really liked that focused expression on his face. It made him look manly.

"Just keep on going straight and eventually we will end up at the ocean, no?" I said.

"I suppose."

We drove past several office buildings, a hotel, and a local NHK building. It was interesting to see a TV station building, even though I never really watched TV. Although I heard that people of Yamada-san's generation kept NHK alive because they grew up watching it. Next to that was a McDonald's.

"There!" I pointed straight ahead. "Look! An island."

Up ahead in the distance was an island with a smoking volcano.

"Ah, that must be Sakurajima, that island with radishes larger than wheels."

I noticed something to the left hand side of the McDonald's.

"What's that large terminal building?" I pointed at it. "Is it some sort of loading dock?"

“No, I think it’s a building where you can board a ferry to Sakurajima and other nearby islands.”

“Heee…” Then I saw something else. “Yamada-san, let’s stop there… what’s that…the sign says Dol…Dolphin Port?”

For some reason there was a shopping mall next to the ocean. It only had one floor and was located far away from the city center. It felt really out of place. It curved slightly, like a banana.

Yamada-san turned right and parked the car in the parking lot.

“You could’ve just left it in the middle of the road,” I said.

“It’s the orderly Japanese man in me that demands I park properly.”

“Pfff - hahaha,” I laughed.

“Stop laughing, JK.”

“Sorry, sorry. You just looked so serious when you said that.”

“I was serious.”

“That’s why it’s funny.”

All the stores at Dolphin Port were closed. Of course they were.

“Why would they build a shopping mall here?” Yamada-san wondered.

“Maybe it’s meant for tourists?”

“I can’t imagine tourists coming to Kagoshima. Most foreigners fly to Osaka, Tokyo, and Sapporo. Who would come to Kagoshima?”

“We came to Kagoshima.”

“Yeah, but we came because our survival depends on it.”

We wandered around the area and then saw the harbor.

“Whoa…” I mouthed.

The harbor was jam packed with boats and ships of all sizes. Some of them were capsized and some only partially visible. There were some boats that were completely charred and torn to pieces — as if someone had blown them apart. It looked as if fights had broken out on the deck of some of these boats. Towards the harbor exit, I could see several boats jammed together, as if they all wanted to leave at the same time, but there was panic and they all crashed into each other.

“It looks like a battlefield,” I said.

“People flooded into Kagoshima to get away from the virus, and they must’ve been fighting with the locals over who gets to board a ship.”

When we wandered closer, we saw some bloated decayed bodies lying at the shore.

“There must be hundreds of bodies underwater,” I said.

“Let’s go back to the shopping mall.”

“Yeah.”

We went back to Dolphin Port and broke into a store to get some drinks. Then we sat down on a bench.

A strong gust of wind blew past us. Above us, the sky was grey and murky, like there’d never be sunshine ever again.

“It’s colder than I thought it would be,” Yamada-san commented.

“Mhh, you’re right,” I said and buttoned up my coat, “but it’s still warmer than winter in Niigata. It should be snowing in northern Kanto by now.”

“Yeah.”

For a while, we sat on the bench and neither of us said anything. We gazed out at the ocean, at the volcano that marked Sakurajima. I wonder if there are survivors on that island. I hope at least some of the children and their parents survived — that was my earnest desire. Otherwise this world would be just too cruel.

“Are you okay?” Yamada-san asked.

“Hmm?”

“That monk was the second guy you killed, right? You seemed sick after that.”

“Mm, I’m okay,” I said and shook my head. “It’s just…this cold feeling lingers in my chest, and for a long time I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Sorry…”

“It’s okay.”

There was another feeling in my chest, and I knew what it was. This nagging sensation was guilt.

I lied to Yamada-san. From the moment we met, one of the first things I told him was a lie.

“Yamada-san…I’m sorry.”

“Hmm? What for?”

“That monk wasn’t the second person I ever killed. He was the third.”

“What?” He sounded surprised.

“There are some other things I lied about too. My uncle wasn’t a police officer, and I didn’t get the gun from him.”

“Then how did you…”

How did a JK like me get a gun?

“I was chased out of Niigata and had to survive the winter on my own. I had nowhere to go and that was when I encountered a police officer just outside of Niigata. He was also from Tokyo and he took me in. I thought he was a nice guy and it seemed like I could trust him. But about a week later, he pushed me down…and he wanted to put his thing in me. He said that it was only natural for us to do this kind of thing since the world was ending.”

“Sayaka…”

I continued to speak. I needed to tell Yamada-san the truth.

“At that time I thought it was okay to let him do me, even though I didn’t want to. I tried to think about it in a practical way. I couldn’t survive the winter without shelter, and there was nowhere else for me to go. I didn’t know who would discriminate against me because of my accent. I’m not stupid; I know that my status as a JK makes me very desirable among men. I thought maybe it’s better to just let him do me. At least I could survive the winter that way. When he put it in, it hurt…it hurt a lot. He didn’t wait for me to get wet…and…”

My body was shaking even though I didn't feel cold. Yamada-san put his arm around my shoulder, and I leaned against his chest. I breathed in and out. His warmth was comforting.

"But he stopped being nice to me and treated me as a maid. I hated it. I hated it so much. So one day I had an idea. I told him it was always a fantasy of mine to do it with a police officer. So he dressed up in his full uniform, and while we were doing it, I reached for his gun holster, took his firearm and shot him in the gut. That was the first person I killed."

Yamada-san's grip around my shoulder tightened. I think he has put on more muscle since we first met. He definitely looks manlier now.

He said nothing and never let go of me. We sat on the bench, looking at the grey ocean, at the half sunken ships, at whatever remained of the world.

"Geez, say something already," I said.

"Sorry…I just thought…it's a terrible thing you had to go through. I'm sorry for taking you to my apartment when we first met. It must've felt really dangerous for you."

"Mm, I was the one who followed you."

For a while, neither of us said anything.

"I feel really down right now. Tell me a story to cheer me up."

"Right, okay…uhm…okay, I know a story. So a long time ago there was a prince and — ouch! Why did you punch me in the side?"

"I'm not a child anymore! Tell me a *real* story! Like one of your naughty office tales or something crazy from your time at university."

"You make it sound like I did nothing but hook up with girls all the time. Do I look like some kind of gigolo? I was a very diligent worker, okay? In fact I was the hardest working newbie when I first arrived and even got praised by my boss in front of everyone else."

"Ehhhh, that sounds really lame. What did your boss say? Good job Yamada-san, you are the perfect slave, thank you for working so hard so I can get a higher bonus."

"Ugh…"

"Just tell me something fun. Like tell me about your first kiss. Actually, you know what, I will make up a story."

"Okay…?"

"So you had your first kiss when you were in high school. There was that girl you really liked, but then you saw her making out and doing naughty things with a senpai behind the school building and that broke your heart."

"Hey, why are you making me sound like a loser?"

"That's just my story. Anyway…and then your heart was broken, and there was another girl who liked you, and she confessed to you, and then you two kissed, but then broke up soon after that."

"My youth was nothing like that."

"Fine, then tell me a real story from your youth. I want to hear about your university days."

Yamada-san sighed. "Fine…"

He thought about it for a little while and then told me a story from his youth. An unpleasant sensation spread in my chest when he mentioned the girls he met at university, but I was the one who asked for it. Even so, his story was interesting. I suppose it’s because I will never complete my own youth, although Yamada-san said before that there was nothing much to look forward to after high school, just monotonous work. Despite that, I still wished I could’ve experienced society as a proper adult. Even though I knew that there was nothing special about it, I still felt curious.

The entire time he kept his arm around me. It felt nice.

The wind carried the scent of the ocean. In the distance, the Sakurajima volcano let out a cloud of smoke. When the wind died down, it was utterly still, and all I could hear was Yamada-san’s voice.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. This is Oniisanbomber.

By the time “I Met You After the End of the World” comes out, it will have been almost exactly one year since the first volume of “I Fell in Love With A Soapland Girl!” was published. Many readers have read that series and my isekai series “Instead of Becoming the Hero, I’ve Reincarnated as a Billionaire”. Thank you so much for your support! It really is super encouraging to see your comments and reviews.

If you haven’t heard of my other series, please check out the Soapland preview after the afterword.

I had the idea for a post-pandemic light novel around the time when I was writing the second volume of the Soapland series. At that time I was busy with other projects, so I didn’t get around to writing this story until this year.

My editor was asking me, “Why is it always a JK?” Of course the female main character has to be a JK! While such JKs may not exist in real life, it is an ideal which keeps the flame in our hearts burning. It is like the values which kept the fire of the French Revolution going.

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

And JKs!

Although this time around, the JK has a pretty good K/D ratio. Just like the French Revolution.

Now for the acknowledgements.

This is my first time working together with a20 after Apple-Ringo had to retire due to personal circumstances. a20 did an insanely good job, don’t you think? This artwork is just so beautiful! That dreamy look in Sayaka’s eyes is breathtaking.

And a big thank you to my editor who puts up with my terrible grammar. The most recent remark my editor made was that she couldn’t believe I

went to university and got degree in literature. I will try to be less of a burden in the future. I promise!

As always, please follow me on Twitter (@oniisanbomber) for all the latest updates.

Until next time.

Oniisanbomber

I Met You After the End of the World Volume 1

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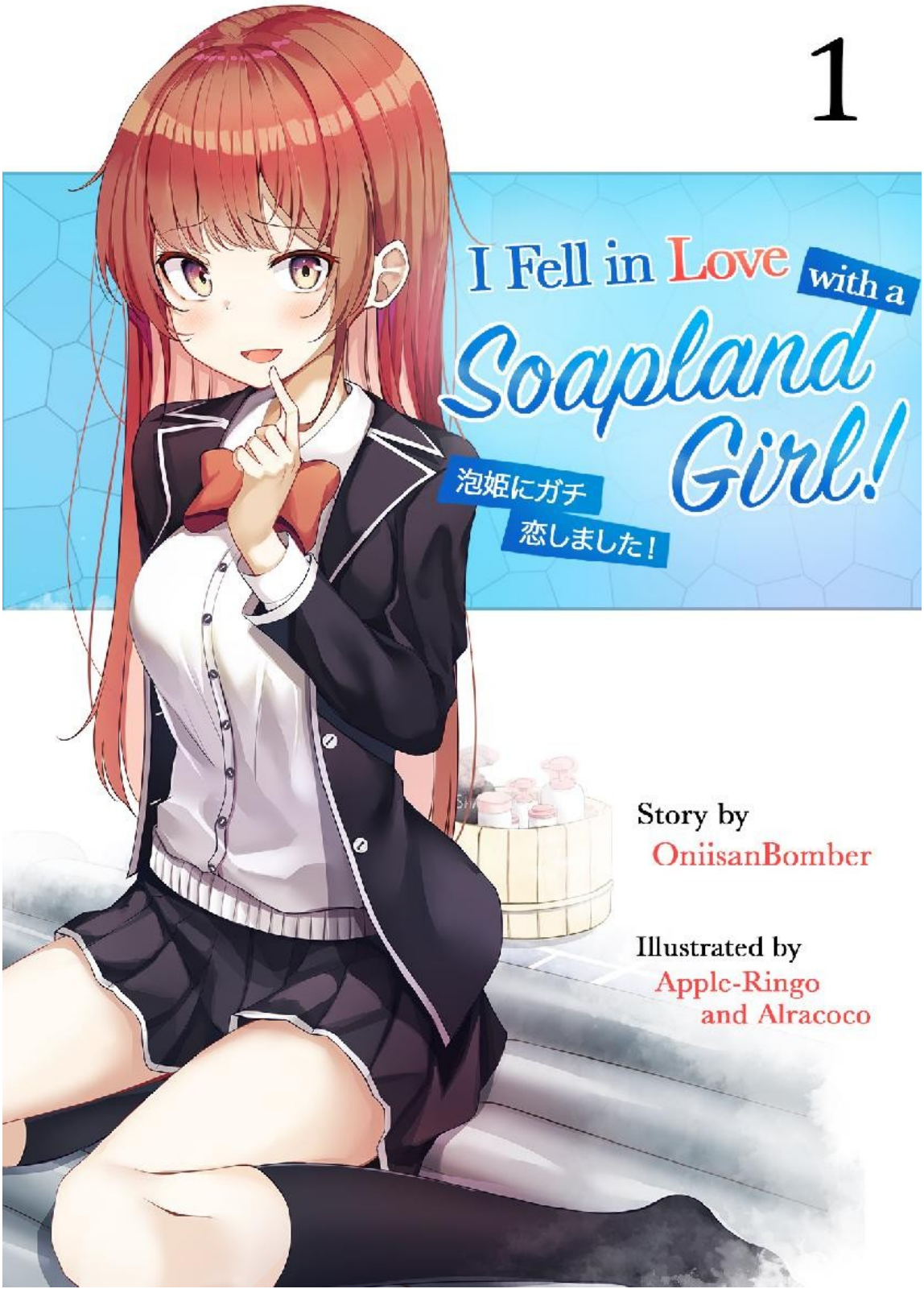

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and Alracoco

I Fell in Love With A Soapland Girl! Volume 1 Preview

Today I am going to lose my virginity.

I made a booking at a reputable soapland (or at least as reputable as a house of ill repute can get). The soapland offered to send a white van to pick me up from the station, but I declined. I told the person on the phone that I'd rather walk.

I was super nervous about the whole thing. I had obviously never been to a soapland before. Even as I was walking out from the station, I felt butterflies in my stomach.

The soapland itself was a twenty minute walk from the station, located deep within a quiet neighborhood.

The neighborhood looked like it had seen better times. A lot of the houses looked abandoned and not a single person was out on the street. Even the vending machines had been shut down.

Maybe this was one of the places that thrived during the bubble era, and then the residents slowly moved out when the party ended.

Eventually, I found the address I copied from the website. On the outside, the building looked a bit run down, but according to my research, this was unmistakably it. It was the kind of building you'd walk past without a second thought.

Maybe that was the intention of this soapland — to hide in plain sight.

I stood in front of the door. I could still turn around, go home and everything would be the same as it was before.

The same as before...

I've been a virgin for twenty-seven years, and although I had a few girlfriends when I was in university, I somehow never ended up at a love hotel with any of them.

I always tried to be a gentleman. I always offered her my coat, always made sure I didn't eat garlic or onions before a date, always planned our dates, and never tried to get my date drunk so that I could make a move on her. I wasn't super handsome, nor was I ugly.

I guess I just had bad luck throughout my youth. Now my youth was over, with one important memory missing.

Once I started working at a company, I had no time or energy for romantic pursuits. Every day was just work and more work. After work, I ate dinner, watched some TV, and then went to sleep. On weekends I was too tired to do anything other than sleep.

Such was the life of a normal salaryman.

I didn't want to go back with my virginity intact. All of my friends had done it before. I was the only one at risk of turning into a wizard.

My hands were sweaty. I reached out and grabbed the doorknob. I turned it and pulled.

"Welcome."

I walked into a small reception lobby. A tall bald muscular man in a suit greeted me. His voice was deep. Was this some kind of bouncer the soapland hired to discourage customers from acting out of line?

"Are you Sato-sama?" he asked.

"Y-yes. I called earlier..."

"Thank you very much for your booking." He bowed. "Please follow me to the waiting area."

The big bald man took me to a dimly lit room with several large armchairs facing away from where we entered. There were two other customers waiting. The armchairs were arranged in a way to prevent us from seeing each other. The dim light helped too.

The big bald man guided me to an empty armchair and handed me a leather folder.

"This is our menu. Please take your time, and when you have decided, press this button."

He gestured at a white button on the armrest.

"Okay, thank you."

The big bald man disappeared.

I opened the black folder and every page was filled with the profiles of several girls. Every profile contained their picture, their name, some vague lines describing their personality, their age, likes and dislikes, as well as their three sizes.

Below each profile was a little table listing the days and times they were available, and their prices.

My heart beat fast.

I could feel the immorality oozing out of this folder.

Honestly, I felt a little pathetic for losing virginity like this. But I really wanted to feel a woman's touch! Every time my friends and I went drinking, I have to listen to their stories, and it's so awkward having to dodge their questions.

I sighed.

My youth was already over. I was a salaryman now. This was the only way.

The other two guys made their choices and were led away.

Let's see...

I flipped through the menu. All the girls were pretty, but none of them really caught my attention. The idea of sleeping with a pretty girl was something I dreamed about. All of these girls were really cute, but if she was a complete stranger...

Maybe this was a bad idea after all. I should just go home and —

"Hmm?"

My eyes landed on the last page.

This girl...

I stared at her profile, my mouth half open.

Her name was Himeko.

Out of all the girls on the menu, she was the only one wearing a school uniform. On top of that, she somehow looked different from the other girls. She definitely looked cute, but in a wholesome kind of way.

She had long chestnut hair, and she looked at the camera with a gentle, almost invisible smile.

It was hard to describe, but she felt 'real' compared to the other pictures.

And then there was also the fact that she looked a lot like the girl I liked when I was in high school.

I gulped.

Was this really okay?

I pressed the button, and the big bald man immediately came in.

"I'm very sorry for the wait. Have you decided, Sato-sama?"

"Y-yes...uhm, I'd like her, if possible."

I pointed at her profile.

The big bald guy looked at the picture and his brows furrowed. His mouth was half open as if he was hesitant about my choice. He looked like he didn't want me to choose this girl.

"Are you sure, sir?"

What a weird question.

"Yes, is she not available?"

"She is available...but..."

He didn't finish the sentence. He seemed to be contemplating something. Several moments of silence passed before he spoke again.

"Thank you very much," he said. "Please come with me."

He led me upstairs and down a narrow corridor with several doors on each side. Perverted noises leaked out from each door.

The big bald man opened a door at the end of the corridor. I entered.

"Please wait a moment. Himeko will be with you shortly."

"Oh, okay."

The big bald man bowed and closed the door.

The room he showed me to was amazing.

There was a large sofa to the left, and on the right, there was a bath area along with an air mattress. Bottles of unknown liquid were arranged neatly alongside the mattress.

Even someone like me knew what kind of liquid those bottles contained.

I sat down on the sofa.

Damn it, why did I still feel so nervous?

I guess it's only natural.

Several moments passed. Then the door opened.

"Sorry for the wait, my name is Himeko. Thank you for choosing me~"

A JK entered the room. Or rather, a girl who looked exactly like a JK.

She wore a black blazer with a white collared shirt, a red ribbon, a buttoned sweater with her sleeves sticking out a little from the blazer, and a short skirt. She wore black socks and brown leather shoes. Her long chestnut hair reached down to her waist.

This looked like a real school uniform. It was amazing how genuine this looked.

I knew soaplands were supposed to deliver a fantasy, but I didn't know they were this good at their jobs.

"Y-yes! Sorry for bothering you."

Wait, why was I apologizing? Ah damn it, I was such a loser that I didn't even know how to behave properly at a soapland. I should have looked up soapland etiquette before coming here.

Himeko put her hands behind her back and leaned forward. Her face filled my vision.

She was so pretty. Her almond shaped eyes were beautiful and her eyelashes were so long. Her nose was and lips were well arranged. Her skin was so smooth.

This girl was the embodiment of wholesome cute; the kind of cute that would cause any man to want to protect her with his life — a girl worth dying for.

"Heh-heh~ Were you looking forward to seeing me? What should I call you?"

"I'm Sato Hiroshi."

"Hmm, then I'll call you Sato-san, okay?"

She smiled and winked.

"Okay."

She sat down next to me and wrapped herself around my arm.

"It's so quiet here these days. I've been lonely. Thank you for choosing me."

I knew that this was all an act, yet I couldn't help but feel excited about this. Talking to a JK was a fantasy many salarymen had.

"Really?" I said. "I heard…uhm, lots of noises coming from the other doors."

Himeko blushed slightly.

"Ehehe~ Today there are a lot of customers. I just mean that not many choose me, so I'm glad you picked me, Sato-san."

She took my hand. Her hand felt soft and small.

"Hmm, I've learned a little about massages. Judging by your hand, you seem a little tired, Sato-san."

"I guess, I've been tired lately."

"Then I will do my best to help you relax."

She guided my hand to her chest. Suddenly I felt something warm and soft against the palm of my hand.

“Do you like my boobs, Sato-san? Sometimes I feel like they are too big…”

Her breasts stretched the fabric of her sweater.

She had a petulant look on her face.

My mouth was half open. Soaplands were magical places where dreams came true. I knew it was all fake, but just like Disneyland, it was still magical.

Who would’ve thought that Disneyland and soaplands were fundamentally the same?

“Th-They are nice,” I stammered.

“Hehe~ I’m glad you like them. You can touch me all you want, okay?”

I nodded.

“Let me wash your back~"

She took off her blazer and then proceeded to take off my clothes. It took her awhile to unbutton my shirt; her movements were a bit clumsy, as though she didn't know how to take off a man's clothes.

"Sorry, sorry," she said with a sheepish smile.

"Oh, no, it's all right."

This was actually the first time I was going to be naked in front of a woman. Suddenly I felt self-conscious. I was neither fat nor skinny, but I wasn’t muscular either. No salaryman had the energy to work out on weekends. But that was just my assumption. Maybe most guys had six packs and super large biceps?

She stripped me down, and the entire time she kept her eyes on the ground.

I sat down in a *sukebe* chair, and she began to wash my back.

Her slim hands traveled all over my body.

“Heee, Sato-san, you’re in pretty good shape.”

“Really?”

“Mh-hmm! Most guys are too fat these days. It must be because everyone is working so hard and eating unhealthy stuff. I’m glad to see that you are taking care of yourself.”

I let out a silent breath of relief. My body was actually better than average. Although I wasn’t sure if she was just trying to flatter me.

“Your muscles are very tense. Has work been busy lately?" she asked.

Her hands were all over my back. She reached up and gave me a shoulder massage.

It has been a while since anyone had given me a simple shoulder massage. I let out an involuntary groan. This felt really good.

“Hahaha," Himeko crackled with laughter. "I'm glad you're enjoying this."

"Work has been busy lately, although I can't remember a time when it wasn't busy."

"Poor you~ You've been working so hard, so l-let me re-reward you today. You can do me r-really hard, okay?”

Huh? Something in her voice had changed slightly. She still sounded happy and easy going, but there was a quiver in her voice. She was trying to say lewd stuff, but it just ended up sounding awkward.

"My uniform is getting wet. Please wait one moment. I need to take off my shirt..."

Her hands left my back, and I could hear the sounds of clothes being removed. In the mirror in front of me, I could see her removing her red ribbon and unbuttoning her shirt. She had a demure expression.

She looked up and our eyes met in the mirror.

Her face flushed red.

"Uhm, s-sorry!" I looked away.

"Mm, it's okay."

She looked down and continued to take off her clothes.

Why was I feeling embarrassed about this?! I was at a soapland. I was supposed to enjoy...well, her. It felt odd putting it like that.

She took off her shirt and revealed a black lace bra. That underwear looked way more mature than I expected. Although I wasn't sure what I was expecting. Since she looked exactly like a JK, I thought...

"Please relax," she said. Suddenly I felt something warm and soft against my back. She moved up and down.

"Does this feel good?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Mm, that's good."

I could feel her warm breath against my ear. Whoa, she smelled so good.

Her hands reached around and rested on my thighs.

“…Heh-heh…"

Her voice sounded slightly forced. Maybe most other guys wouldn't have picked up on this, but I guess I was more sensitive to how other people talked.

"Uhm...are you okay?" I asked.

She stopped moving.

"Eh? Uhm...Ehehe~"

It was just a short string of utterances, but I detected a range of conflicting emotions.

She reached down and grabbed a part of my body no woman had touched before.

I looked down. Her hands were shaking.

For a moment I didn't understand what I was looking at. Why were her hands shaking? Was this part of her act? But what would the point of that be?

...

This didn’t look like it was part of her act.

Was it possible that she was scared?

"Hey, uhm, Himeko?"

"Y-Yes, Sato-san?"

"You don't need to do this."

"Eh, no, I have to, I mean I want to please you…"

Without even looking at her I could tell what her expression was like based on her voice alone.

I was starting to understand why the big bald guy was so hesitant about me choosing her.

"You don't have to force yourself." I grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand away. They were still shaking.

I turned around and for a moment I saw an expression on her face that was undoubtedly real. She looked tired, worn out, and scared. When she realized that I had turned around and was looking at her, almost immediately she put on a bright smile.

"Sato-san~ I am super sorry if I did anything to upset you. Let me help you relax, okay?”

She took my hands in hers.

“Himeko, I don’t know how to say this, but you don’t need to do this.”

Her expression froze. Her smile fell. And just as quickly she put on a stiff plastic smile.

“Do you want to exchange me for another girl?"

Somehow seeing this rapid change in her stabbed my heart. It hurt to see a girl like her putting on such a plastic smile. What did life do to her for her to end up working at a place like this?

"I am really grateful," I said.

“Eh…grateful? Sato-san, what do you mean?“

She tilted her head in confusion.

Seeing her tired and scared expression made me realize that I didn't want to do this. I mean I still really wanted to lose my virginity, but this just didn't feel right.

"I think I'll just go," I said and stood up.

"Ehh?" Fear flickered across her face before she regained control of her expression. She grabbed my wrist. There was unexpected strength in her grasp. "Please don't go."

Her voice sounded desperate. The happy-go-lucky JK persona was gone.

“I am deeply sorry, Sato-sama. I beg for your forgiveness. But…but if you leave now, I'll get in trouble," she said. "So please…if you don't want to do it with me, then I can get another girl."

“It's just a matter of time, right?"

“Eh?”

I got up, dried myself with a towel, then put on my clothes. The whole time Himeko stared at the ground.

"Don't worry, I won't leave. And I'm not going to exchange you for another girl either."

“What do you mean?” She looked at me with bewilderment.

"I don't want you to get in trouble."

I sat down on the sofa. Himeko put on her clothes and sat down next to me.

She tried to resume her persona, but her expression was strained.

I wish there was something I could do for her.

I didn't know I had such a white knight complex.

It was obvious that she wasn’t used to her job, and I could understand why the big bald guy didn’t want me to choose her.

"I assume you've lost quite a few customers?"

"Am I really that bad at it…?"

She had her hands tucked between her legs.

"Well, sort of," I said.

"You're so mean!"

Upon hearing her outburst, I couldn’t help but chuckle. We both laughed a bit.

"The big bald guy seemed hesitant when I chose you."

"Oh, you mean Miyagi-san. I've caused him a lot of trouble. Out of all the girls, I'm the only one who has lost customers."

"Are you…uhm, are you new to this business?"

"Kind of..."

Her answer was vague. Did she mean that she had to work at other places like this before?

"Hey, how old — "

I quickly closed my mouth. Even a stupid virgin like me knew that asking personal questions were taboo in a place like this.

“Never mind, it’s nothing.”

"Mm, it's okay. I'm eighteen years-old."

She was eighteen and she had to do work like this.

"I'm twenty-seven," I said, somehow feeling the need to return the honesty.

Looking at her, she was really cute. The way she tucked her shirt into her skirt really emphasized her curves. Her breasts were large and stretched the fabric nicely. I couldn't help but glance at her legs; her thighs were toned and soft.

She was like the girlfriend I never had.

Himeko noticed where I was looking.

"Uhm, I know you paid for something more, but I could give you a lap pillow if you want?"

Heh…I came to a soapland just to get a lap pillow.

"Sure, why not."

I put my head down on her legs and went to heaven.

When I left the soapland, the big bald man asked me how my session went.

Before I left the room, Himeko put her hands together and begged me to put in a good word for her with Miyagi-san.

I wanted to tell her that a girl like her didn't have to work at a place like this, but did I have any right to tell her how to live her life? I had no idea what her circumstances were and yet I still wanted to act self-righteous. And it's not like I had achieved anything special in life.

So I promised her that I would put in a good word for her.

She thanked me with a tight hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"How was your session, Sato-sama?" Miyagi-san asked.

"Uhm...erm, Himeko was very accommodating," I said. "It was fun."

"Fun, you say."

"Y-Yes."

Did he doubt my words? I think I lied quite smoothly.

"Thank you very much for your feedback. May I offer you a ride back to the station?"

"I'll walk, thank you."

I left the soapland and walked back to the station. The whole time Himeko's smile was on my mind.

"What a piece of shit world," I muttered.

It's not like I was any better though.

"So you finally lost your soapland virginity," Nakamura said.

Nakamura and I were sitting at an udon restaurant, slurping down noodles during our lunch hour.

Nakamura was my senpai. He was several years older than me and therefore held seniority. He had been working at the company for ages, but rumors said he had actually avoided promotion to the main branch in order to stay at our small side branch.

Nakamura did emit the air of a slacker. He had droopy eyelids, his hair was a little unkempt and a bit too long. But because he had more experience than anyone else in the office, we all looked to him for advice.

Incidentally, he and I sat next to each other in the office and became work buddies. Even though he was my senpai, we managed to form a closer friendship than most office friendships.

"How was it? It was pretty fun, right?"

"Yeah...I choose a JK. I mean I chose a girl who looked like a JK."

"So you wanted to relive your youth, huh?"

"I guess so, although I didn't have much of a youth. By the way, you look awfully cheerful today. Did something good happen?"

I tried to change the topic, mainly because I didn't want to tell him the truth about what happened. Luckily Nakamura didn't find it suspicious because he actually did look cheerful today (us salarymen didn't get to see each other smile very much).

"Today is the start of summer vacation for high schoolers. My daughter is coming to visit me for a few days."

Nakamura was divorced, and his daughter lived with her mother. He only got to see his daughter once or twice a year. He never told me why he got divorced, but I assumed it must've been messy because his wife didn't let him see his daughter more than what was agreed upon during the divorce proceedings.

"It's summer vacation for students already? Ah, that brings back memories. Although I didn't have a girlfriend like the popular guys and couldn't make beautiful memories."

"Hahaha," he laughed. "That's how it was for most of us. Now we're lonely salarymen, looking at high schoolers with envy. I'll be taking some days off next week so that I can spend more time with my daughter. I'll count on you to handle my workload~"

"Go to hell."

Nakamura laughed. I couldn't help but smile. He and I worked in the same department and were war buddies of sorts. When things got tough in the office, we stuck together.

"Don't worry so much," Nakamura said. "I heard we're getting a summer intern. You could offload your extra work on her."

"I doubt some university kid would be able to handle the work. They'd just cause trouble."

"Didn't the boss tell you? It's not a university student. The summer intern is a local high schooler."

"Eh?"

"My name is Kaneko Ayumi, I will be an intern here for the next month. Please take care of me."

A high school girl in her uniform stood in our office and bowed.

"Everyone can just call me Ayumi."

Our boss, Ogawa, stepped forward.

"Ayumi-chan will work as an amateur model for our company. She will participate in several photoshoots for the new soda drink our company wants to sell, as well as a TV commercial. It's just a small local commercial, but I want everyone to do their best."

"Yes, sir," the office sounded.

Everyone said those words except me.

I was too busy staring at Ayumi. She looked exactly like Himeko. No, I think she was Himeko. Even identical twins couldn't look this much alike. The same eyes, same nose and lips, the same haircut, the same uniform.

Why was the girl I met at the soapland an intern at my company?!

Shortly after Ayumi/Himeko introduced herself, Ogawa called me into his office.

"Sato-san, I need you to take care of her while she is here," he said and pointed at Ayumi/Himeko through his glass door. She was sitting on the sofa near the elevators.

"What do you mean, Ogawa-san?"

"I know you will have to take on Nakamura's work while he is away, but I want you to take care of Ayumi as well. Somebody needs to drive her to the shooting locations and make introductions. She's still a high schooler, so she can't get around on her own. And after the shoots are done, just be her mentor and find some work for her to do at the office. We're paying her, so you should get some work out of her."

"But why her, Ogawa-san? Shouldn't we hire a celebrity for this job?"

"We are a small branch; we can hardly afford some famous actress or model. Also, I want our commercial to have the theme of youth. Only a real high schooler can embody that. Since this is technically a part-time job for her, we can pay her minimum wage. Anyways, here is her schedule for the next couple of days."

I wanted to raise an objection, but the way Ogawa-san spoke gave me no choice but to simply nod and accept it.

Sigh...I'll be doing a lot of overtime while Nakamura is away. Well, it's not like I was normally getting off work on time anyway.

So I replied with the line every white-collar worker uses when their boss gives them an assignment they don’t want to do.

“Thank you for this opportunity. I’ll be able to learn a lot from this. I’ll do my best. Please excuse me.”

I left Ogawa’s office. It was time to confront her.

I walked over to where she sat. She wore the same uniform I saw her in yesterday, even her skirt length was the same. She sat on the sofa with her knees pressed together and her hands on her lap. She looked like a model student.

"Uhm...err, Ayumi. My name is Sato Hiroshi. I've been assigned to be your mentor during your time here. You can just call me Sato-san."

She looked at me. For a moment she said nothing. Cold sweat ran down my back. Did she recognize me? Or had she forgotten about me already? As wholesome as she looked, I had to remind myself that she probably received several customers a day, dozens a week, and probably couldn't remember me.

That thought made my stomach lurch, now that I knew that she was a real high schooler. I was pretty sure that it was illegal for that soapland to hire her.

[To read more, please check out the full volume on Amazon or Kobo]

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